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Guitar & Bass

Eighties Strats

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Seagull
Chris Spedding
Digitech
Lap steel madness
and more...

Burns electric & Music Man bass reviews

Private Collection
Top gear to rev your engine

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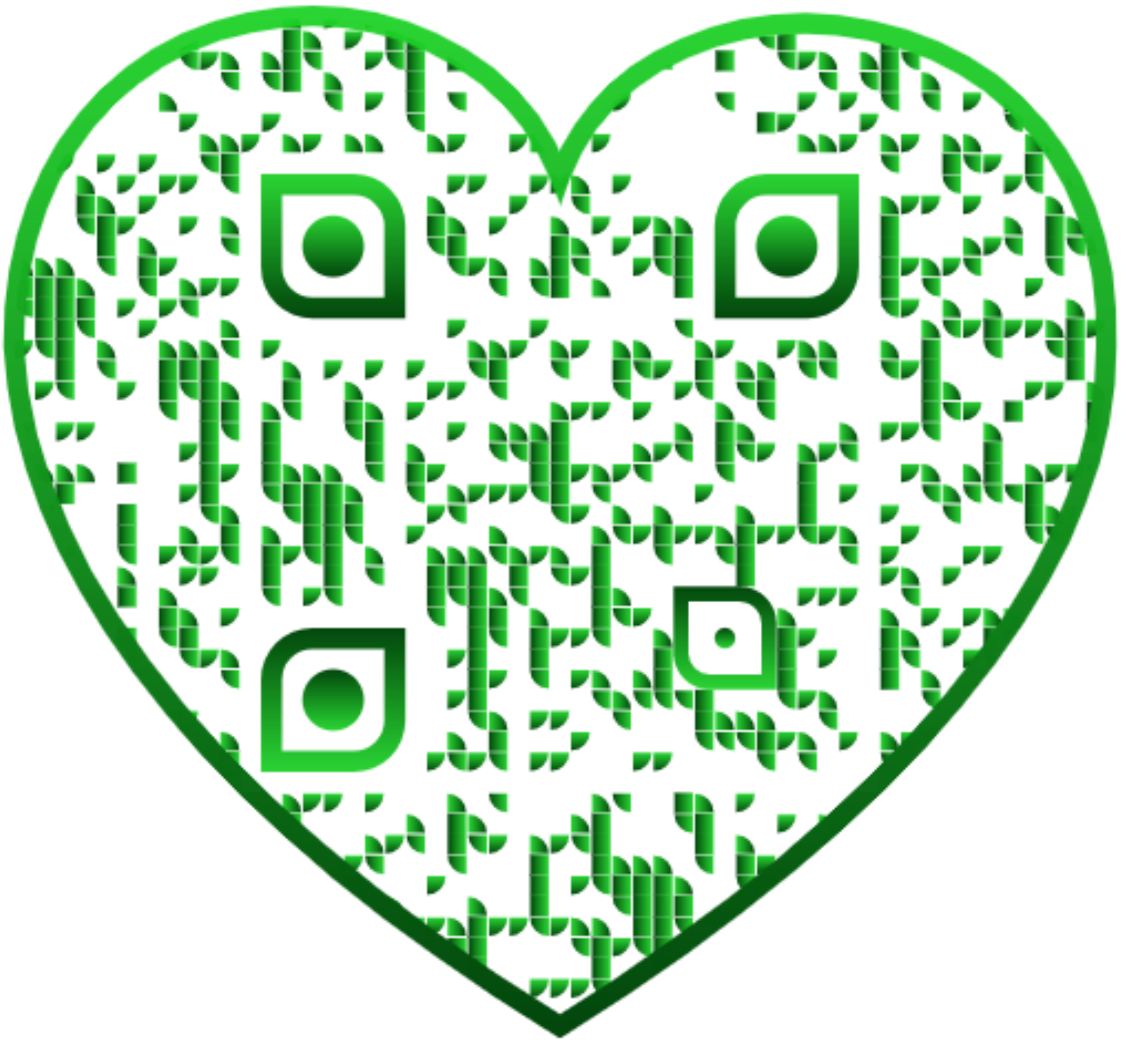

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A history of the future...

Plenty of tales have been told in *Guitar & Bass* over the years about the Stratocaster's early days, but we tend to take its more recent history for granted. This month's cover feature on the Stratocaster during the 1980s is an engrossing tale of how Fender dealt with a multitude of challenges – including changing player tastes and the issue of copies – and came out on the other side. Some of the decisions made back then regarding the guitar's development worked whilst others fell by the wayside, but plenty of alterations were made during the '80s that still resonate in the 21st century. All in all, it's a fascinating period that's well worth exploring.

Elsewhere, gear fiends of all persuasions can dive right into our reviews section, which this month features models from Burns, Music Man, Seagull, DigiTech, and more. On the interviews front, we talk all things guitar with Chris Spedding and Denny Laine, and vintage fans have Sid Bishop, Phil Harris and our *Private Collection* to nestle up against all cosy, like. There are also features on Supro amps and lap steels that will blow the cobwebs away.

As always, if you need more *G&B* sustenance before the next issue comes out, feel free to fill your boots at www.guitar-bass.net. For now, we'll wish you success in all your guitar-related endeavours, and let you get on with reading what you've paid for...

John

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Guitar courtesy of www.notomguitars.com, Denmark Street

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Free Blackstar FLY Mini Amp

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From the Moody Blues to Wings and beyond, this mercurial minstrel shares his story

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Reverberations

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STAR LETTER

Over 120 stores and venues took part in Learn To Play Day 2015

THE NEXT GENERATION

Hello. Just wanted to let you know that the Learn To Play Day just gone has got a least one (maybe two) converts. I took my nephew down to PMT in Salford on the day. I'm a wannabe guitarist of some years standing (as in I've got an acoustic that I play beginner chords on every now and again – and I buy your magazine as a way of 'claiming to be a guitar player' that I really haven't earned), and I wanted to be a good uncle and see if he would be bitten by the bug. Well, my nephew was instantly taken with the electrics on the wall, and when a kind member of staff plugged in a guitar and told him where to place his fingers for a couple of chords you'd think he'd won the ticket to Charlie's Chocolate Factory. Eventually, I had to pull him away in order to get him back to his parents. I made the mistake of telling him that if he promised he'd practice, I'd buy him a starter kit. I'm reliably informed he hasn't shut up about it since, and is looking at online videos of lessons and talking about starting a band. So it looks like I'm back to PMT soon with my credit card out. I might even treat myself to an electric and an amp – after all, I'd just be being supportive. I'll end with saying that I hope that the Learn To Play thing continues, as anything that gets people into music rather than just listening to it is worth its weight in gold.
Eddie Burkett *via email*

G&B **Well done, sir – and to those fine folks at PMT and everywhere else in the country who helped inspire young and old on Learn To Play Day to take up an instrument. We've said this so many times, but we'll happily say it again... unless you're a professional who's looking to earn a living, it really doesn't matter how well you can play, as long as you're getting the many benefits out of it. And it's also worth noting that every legend featured in this magazine has been as good or as bad as you are right now. Overall, learning to play a musical instrument is worthwhile regardless of age, musical preferences or ability. Don't believe us? Well, just pick up an instrument (may we suggest a guitar?) and find out for yourself...**

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FINDING YOUR TRUVOICE...

I enjoyed your excellent article on amps (Feb 2015), and seeing the pictures of the Selmer Truvoice Selectortone took me back to 1960. My group was doing regular weekends in the The Star Of India in Peckham, and our amps beside us looked like we'd accidently left our wirelesses on the floor. Then I saw in the new Bells catalogue the new Selmer Selectortone for 72 guineas. I managed to buy one, and at about the same time I took the pickups off my Hofner President and replaced them with a new set-up of Framus pickups all fitted to some kind of scratchplate. These were are all purchased from Melbourne Pianos, a wonderful music shop at Peckham Rye. All I have left from there now are the wonderful memories and the receipts.

Ray Byfield *Sudbury*

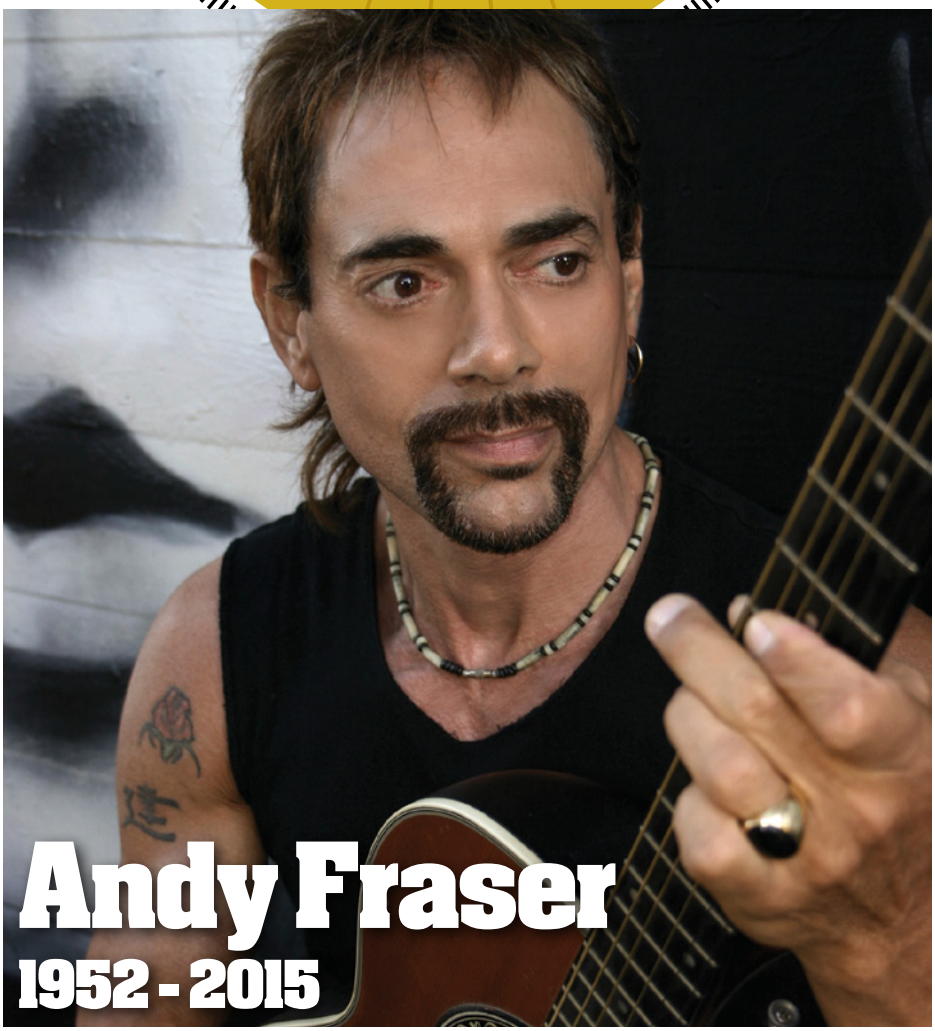
FOLLOW THE PROPHET

I am an avid reader of *Guitar & Bass* and want to know what are the chances of doing a feature on Chuck Prophet in the future? I became aware of him a couple of years ago via a friend. I bought his *Let Freedom Ring* CD and really enjoyed it. I've seen him live a couple of times with the Mission Express and have been blown away by the musicianship. He's a great, tasteful guitar player and his interplay with James DePrato is a wonderful thing to behold. He seems to be a largely ignored and criminally underrated artist. I also like the fact he plays a Squier Telecaster!

Andy Godfrey *via email*

G&B **Rest assured that we're big fans of Mr Chuck Prophet, and have interviewed the man more than once over the years. We'd highly recommend anyone who hasn't heard of him to check out as much as they can, including his work with Green On Red. So, to answer your question, we reckon the chances are pretty high of running a feature on him in the future.**

Woke up this mornin'... NEWS



Andy Fraser
1952 - 2015

The music world has lost the inventive songwriter and uniquely melodic bass player who found fame with blues rockers Free

Free bassist Andy Fraser has died aged 62 after lengthy battles with HIV and cancer. Alongside Paul Kossoff, Paul Rogers and Simon Kirke, Fraser became one of blues-rock's most revered low-enders, helping to create a template that many still aspire to today. As co-writer of Free's mighty 1970 smash *All Right Now* (with Paul Rodgers), London-born Andy Fraser booked his place in history.

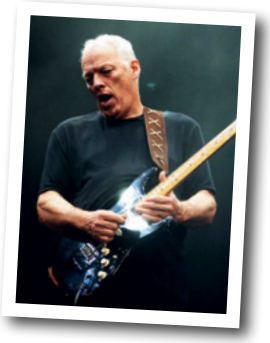
His first break came in 1967. Godfather of British blues Alexis Korner recommended the 15-year old Fraser to John Mayall's Bluesbreakers after the bandleader called desperately needing a bassist for some imminent gigs. Andy went straight off on a European tour playing in the same line up that featured future Stone lead guitarist Mick Taylor. 'It was thrill of my life!' he remembered in 2005.

After the Bluesbreakers came Free in 1968 and an intense four-year period that saw the band release classic albums such as *Free, Tons Of Sobs* and *Fire And Water*, much of which were co-written by Fraser and Paul Rogers. Fraser's aggressive upfront bass style was delivered via a Gibson EB-3, chosen not so much for its thick sound but because its short scale didn't 'swamp' his diminutive frame (sadly, the EB-3 was stolen some years ago).

Though he left the band in 1972 shortly before they split, royalties from Free meant money was never again an imperative. There were other bands, such as Sharks alongside Chris Spedding, not to mention the Andy Fraser Band where Fraser took the vocals, but none found a foothold. Fraser's songwriting, however, was still potent. *Every Kinda People* – first made famous by Robert Palmer – became a radio staple and has often been covered.

In 2005 it was widely reported that Fraser had died; it turned out to be a false alarm, but by this time he was indeed gravely ill. Reading his own obituary did spur Andy on to release new material, and in recent years his output has been prolific, with much of that work available through his own innovative online Mctrax music delivery system. Sadly, this time it appears the reports of his passing are accurate and there will be no reprieve.

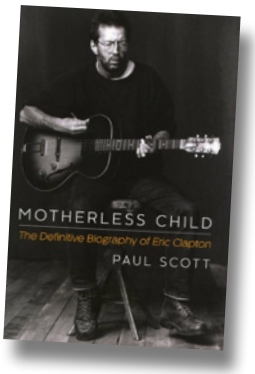
Gilmour to tour for the first time in nine years



Much has been made of the fact that Pink Floyd man David Gilmour has been in the studio recording his fourth solo album with ex-Roxy Music man Phil Manzanera at the desk. Now live shows have been set for September, and a release date that month looks likely. As we go to press gigs in Italy, Croatia, Germany and France are booked, plus five shows at the Royal Albert Hall; dates at Manchester's Bridgewater Hall and Glasgow's Clyde Auditorium have been mooted, but not confirmed. If interested, it's well worth scooting over to www.davidgilmourtour.com to find out more.

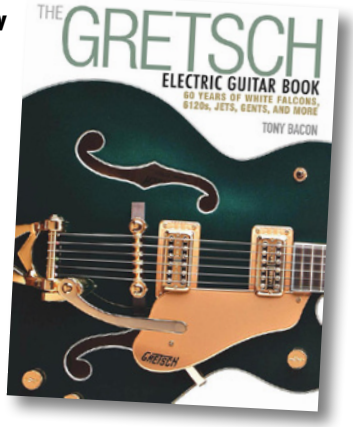
EC CHRONICLED

Released to coincide with Eric Clapton's 70th birthday, a new book, *Motherless Child*, stakes a claim as the 'definitive' EC biography. The title refers to a happy childhood that was blighted somewhat by the Jeremy Kyle-style bombshell that the woman he thought was his older sister was in fact his mother. Author Paul Scott examines this and all Clapton's subsequent peaks and troughs through the Yardbirds, the Bluesbreakers, Cream and Derek and the Dominos, while a good half of the 300 pages are dedicated to his solo years. This is a succinct, smartly-written and well-researched overview of the life and career of the man who became a guitar legend.



Glamour of Gretsch

White Falcons, 6120s, Jets, Country Gents and more – *The Gretsch Electric Guitar Book* is a carefully researched book with a gallery of pictures of great guitars, rare memorabilia, and famous Gretsch players. There's all the glitzy, wacky, retro charm that you can handle, plus tales of inconsistent crazy gadgetry, cool beauty and twangy tone. Author Tony Bacon draws both from fresh and archived interviews with the people who designed, played and made the guitars, and there's a comprehensive reference section with all the info on every model.



PICK OF THE BUNCH: 50 YEARS OF DUNLOP

It takes a certain kind of genius to see the potential in tiny pieces of plastic but Mr Jim Dunlop has achieved remarkable things built on just that, and his company is now celebrating its 50th anniversary. When he first moved from Ottawa, Canada to San Francisco in 1965, Jim had only $600 in the bank. He found a job as a machinist, but indulged his inquisitive nature by tinkering with guitar-related inventions in his spare time. His first venture was a tuner which worked by utilising a reed that vibrated sympathetically with the low E string. He pitched it to all the local store owners to no avail; however, he did discover there was a demand for a well-designed 12-string capo, so he cooked up his now patented Overstretched Knee, or Toggle, capo, and it soon earned him regular customers. Next someone mentioned to Jim that you couldn't buy old metal thumbpicks anymore. It was a fateful statement, and Jim began making the picks, ramping up his efforts to include an unheard-of variety of six gauges. His machinist's sense of precision meant players loved the results. He expanded into flatpicks, and by the time he came up with tortoiseshell-style Tortex plectrums, these tiny shards of plastic were becoming big business. Slides and other accessories followed, but today Dunlop is best known for its FX pedals. Jim purchased the Cry Baby brand in 1983 and he and his team soon re-established the pedal as the go-to wah. Dunlop then revived the Fuzz Face and the Univibe chorus/vibrato, also picking up MXR in 1988. In 2008 Way Huge pedals followed and now, with half a century clocked up, Dunlop is one of the most recognised manufacturers in the pedal business. Plus, if you're in need of a pick or a capo, Jim's designs are still hard to beat.

PRS unveils the Vela

With a brand new sculpted offset bodyshape, the Vela is like no PRS before. It's an addition to the US-built S2 range, and echoes the retro charms of the Mira and Starla models but adds a couple of innovations. The neck has 22 frets, while the electronics include a coil-tappable Starla humbucker in the bridge for a bright, punky tone and the new Type-D single coil in the neck, giving the Vela some noteworthy bite. The top-loader bridge is also new; it's got an aluminium baseplate plus two brass three-string saddles, slanted to compensate for intonation, to help provide sustain. There are nine finishes to select from including seafoam green, sienna and vintage cherry. The UK retail price will be £1199, and we recommend a visit to www.prsguitars.com/s2vela for the full specs.

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TICKETS **from £21.50**
CONTACT **www.albertleeandhogansheroes.com**

Mark Knopfler
15-26 MAY
The ex-Dire Straits man starts a huge 85-date jaunt around the globe touring eighth solo album *Tracker*
WHERE? **3 nights in London and 5 in other big cities**
TICKETS **from £51.25**
CONTACT **www.markknopfler.com**

Eric Clapton
14-23 MAY
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WHERE? **7 night residency at the Royal Albert Hall**
TICKETS **from £48.40**
CONTACT **www.ericclapton.com**

Album reviews

Bachman

HEAVY BLUES

Linus Entertainment

Randy Bachman has dipped into raw, gutsy blues rock before, but astute pop song-smithery has more often been his objective. This, however, is a glorious, snarling piledriver of an album. Pals such as Neil Young, Joe Bonamassa and Scott Holiday

join him for some adrenalin-pumping, fuzzed-up jams that blaze with abandon. He's sold over 40 million records, but intensity like this is new territory.

Joe Bonamassa

MUDDY WOLF AT RED ROCKS

Mascot

Bonamassa's live tribute to Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf is a worthy release in many ways. For a start, the concert raised $40,000 for the Keeping The Blues Alive foundation. Added to that, it's a blistering set, where Bonamassa doffs

a respectful cap to the legendary duo whilst putting his own unique stamp on the songs. It's an ideal chance to listen to some stone-cold classics in a brand new light.

Boz Scaggs

A FOOL TO CARE

429

Boz shares guitar duties with Ray Parker Jr on this silky-smooth collection of covers, plus one original (*Hell To Pay* featuring Bonnie Raitt). Boz majors on soul – Curtis Mayfield's *I'm So Proud* is a highlight – but he takes on other genres with

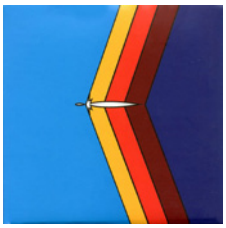
style, even crooning Richard Hawley's *There's A Storm Coming* with gusto. Laidback yet heartfelt with a wistful, JJ Cale-esque feel – and that's praise indeed.

The Boom Band

THE BOOM BAND

Boom Recordings

A new British blues collective graced by four guitarists of renown – Matt Taylor, Marcus Bonfanti, Jon Amor and Mark Butcher – all of whom are formidable singer-songwriters to boot. Pooling their solo creative skills along with keysman Paddy



Milner, they've conjured a special record. Despite the novel vocal-and-guitar rotation system it's a coherent, rootsy, funky weave with an infectious dynamic and hook-filled tunes.

Laurence Jones

WHAT'S IT GONNA BE

Ruf

The chops are proven; Jones' teenage 2012 debut *Thunder In The Sky* proved that in spades. Few Strat-slingers can burn across a fretboard with such finesse, but what's setting him apart right now is his flourishing songcraft and a broad take on

blues rock. The full-on guitar histrionics have been curtailed a tad but still break out ferociously when befits. This formula should be palatable way beyond the guitar buff circuit.

Toto

TOTO XIV

Frontiers

Steve Lukather gets back in the Toto chair for the pop-rock legends' first studio album in a decade. Their millions of fans won't be disappointed. Toto always did worship at the temple of melody, and Lukather's ability to deliver the sonic goods in an

often-minimal way remains undiminished. Some judiciously applied chordal stabs here, a delicious harmonic there... it all adds up to a winning formula.

Dan Patlansky

DEAR SILENCE THIEVES

Dan Patlansky Music Pty Ltd

Ever since South African singer-songwriter Patlansky burst on the scene in the early years of this century he's been cementing himself as one of the most vital blues-rockers around. His latest album is no doubt going to win him some new

fans (to go alongside such famous ones as Bruce Springsteen) with its potent mix of modern muscular grooves that intoxicate both the heart and the head.

Philipp Fankhauser

HOME

Membran

The highly-acclaimed Swiss guitarist returns with a new album stuffed full of superior cuts that showcase Fankhauser's skills as a writer and performer. What's particularly heart-warming is the man's ability to change up his playing for the

song – cock an ear to the 'barely-making-it' strains of opening tracking *Daily Bread* and then check out the feisty bar blues of *Louisiana Lover Man* for conclusive proof.

Robben Ford

INTO THE SUN

Provogue

Ford's back catalogue boasts a staggering 35 albums but, with respect to those past efforts, his creative powers appear to be at their zenith right now, and if you're new to his work you could do no better than to start right here. The mood is

funky and uplifting while the guitar work is graceful, often spiky, and always exquisite. Sonny Landreth, Robert Randolph and Keb Mo drop in as a bonus.

SNAP JUDGEMENTS

Little Mountain
LITTLE MOUNTAIN
Fly Agaric

Morcheeba guitarist Ross Godfrey's trio major in sun-kissed folk rock, melancholy and uplifting in turns, ably assisted by some sumptuous guitar tones

Eliana Cargnelutti
ELECTRIC WOMAN
Ruf

Italian ex-metaller Eliana has taken to a fierce brand of blues with unrestrained relish, dishing out both technique and raunch

Villagers
DARLING ARITHMETIC
Domino

Conor O'Brien's delicate and articulate acoustic laments are rich in poetic philosophical introspection, with an understated elegance that draws you in close

Therapy
DISQUIET
Amazing Record Co.

Dark, chugging punk metal with an anthemic bent is this trio's stock-in-trade and this visceral, melodic outing marks a boisterous return those core values

Lost Dawn
LOST DAWN
Easy Action

Pop-powered garage psych mayhem from a cosmic trio at the fore of a spaced-out '60s scene, all germinating in darkest Cornwall with hedonistic intent

Whitehorse
LEAVE NO BRIDGE UNBURNED
Six Shooter

Melissa McCelland and Luke Doucett distil rockabilly, alt. country and indie pop into a sublimely offbeat brew with rousing vigour

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KICK *Up The* '80S

Guitar courtesy of www.notonguitars.com, Denmark Street

From vintage reissues to humbucking metal monsters to the first Fender signature guitars, the Strat went through more changes in the '80s than in the rest of its life. **Michael Heatley** tracks one guitar's decade of upheaval

In the '50s there was Buddy Holly... the '60s had Hendrix, the '70s Clapton. So who was the Strat-wielding guitar hero of the '80s? Stevie Ray Vaughan, perhaps? Yngwie Malmsteen... or maybe even Mark Knopfler?

The fact we're debating the point doesn't mean Leo Fender's finest six-string design had disappeared – rather the fact that music had diversified so much by this time that one man's icon had become another's unknown quantity. More than that, the world at large had caught up with the popularity of the Fender Stratocaster to such an extent that it was, and would continue to be, the subject of more copies than a swot's exam answers.

Fender's '80s was divided into two distinct halves. The early years saw cost-cutting measures taken to bring the company back into profit – income having dived from a $60 million peak in 1980 – then an influx of new blood at the top and, eventually, a management buy-out from owners CBS.

The Strat was now embarking on its second quarter-century; the first had been marked just before the decade dawned with a limited edition 25th Anniversary offering that epitomised CBS' confused thinking. Its maple neck with body-end truss-rod adjustment was the only concession to 1954-era tradition, as locking Sperzel machineheads underlined, and it pleased neither old stagers nor new converts. ↔

New alternatives

Up until the Eighties, the Strat had basically been a 'one size fits all' guitar; when the headstock size was increased by around 10 per cent in late 1965 it applied across the board and would remain as standard through the '60s and '70s; the three-bolt neckplate and headstock-end bullet truss-rod adjuster had arrived in 1971, while it also acquired a second string tree to guide the middle pair of strings.

Fender first tried to return to the small headstock in 1980, but didn't get the shape quite right. The model known, confusingly, as 'The Strat' also had a 'hot' X-1 bridge pickup, brass hardware and was the first Stratocaster to have the abbreviation 'Strat' on its headstock. Before promising 'new, thicker sounds with the flick of a finger', the somewhat ambitious advertising slogan asked the question: 'What looks like yesterday, sounds like tomorrow and can help make you a legend in your own time?'

A curious near-relation that appeared in '81 was the 'Gold' Stratocaster, with matching body and plated hardware paired with the neck of The Strat. This time the headstock was natural finish rather than colour-matched, while the C-prefix serial indicated it was part of a 'collector's series'. Like The Strat, it had body-end truss-rod adjustment and, untypically for that period, a four-bolt neck.

The year 1981 had seen mega-corporation owners Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) install a new management team at Fender, headed by new president Bill Schultz. He decided on a 'back to the future' policy, bringing in Dan Smith from Yamaha as chief designer and consulting with employees of the pre-CBS Fender era including designer Freddie Tavares, pickup winder Gail Paz and final assembly inspector Gloria Fuentes. The aim was to make Stratocasters that were closer to their original specs, but CBS's level of reinvestment in the profitable years had been poor, and a much-needed modernisation programme was put in place at the Fullerton factory. Production stopped while new machinery was installed and staff re-trained.

The '70s-spec Stratocaster continued as the main production model until 1981, when the four-bolt neck, the small headstock and the body-end truss-rod adjustment of the Standard Stratocaster marked an attempted return to traditional values. Yet despite all the good intentions of newcomers Schultz and Smith, the early '80s saw CBS hitting the panic button.

'The Strat' mixed luxury with halfway-vintage features

Guitars like the Tokai Springy Sound underlined the fact that Fender had to adapt, and fast

The 1982 Standard Strat, aka the 'Smith Strat', had better body contours but the wrong headstock shape

International Series 1981 Strat in rare Sahara Taupe

Another Smith-era '82 Strat, this time in Olympic white

Eighties Stratocaster TIMELINE

1980 'The Strat' is the first new model of the decade

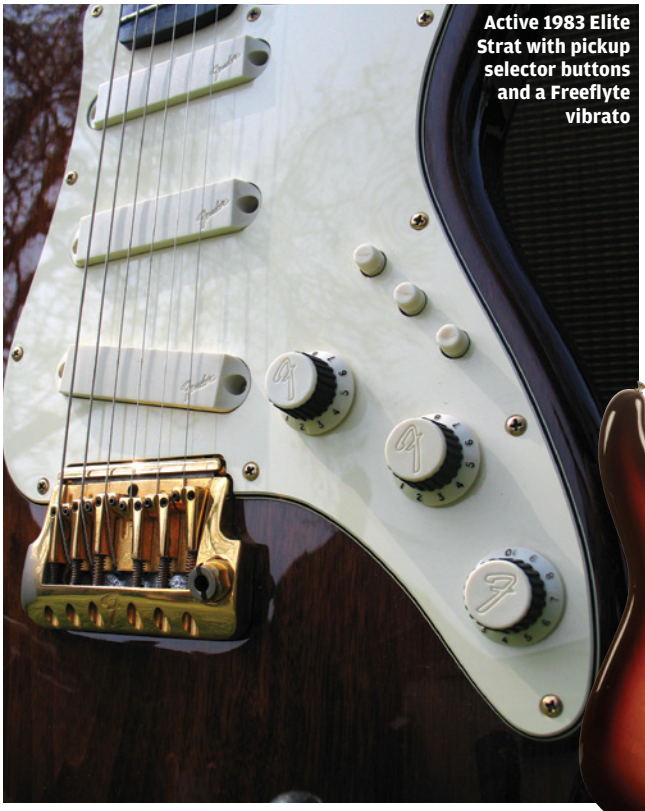
1981 Fender imports new management from Yamaha in president Bill Schultz and designer Dan Smith

1982 Strat production begins for the first time outside the US as Fender Japan starts production of Vintage Reissue series

1982 The Squier name is adopted to badge authorised Fender 'copies'

1983 Upmarket Elite Strat is introduced, but only lasts two years

1984 First humbucker-equipped Strat, the Japanese Contemporary, makes its debut



Active 1983 Elite Strat with pickup selector buttons and a Freeflyte vibrato

Left, a first-series Squier '62 reissue Strat from late spring, 1982

With its Freeflyte vibrato, push button selectors and solid pickup covers, the Elite Strat was almost change for change's sake

With profits still dropping, 1983 saw Fender go down the dangerous road of making economies: the Standard Stratocaster was revised, emerging with only one tone knob and without the distinctive recessed jack socket that had been a space-age recognition feature since 1954. These cheapskate ideas, including a revised vibrato unit using tension-adjustable springs mounted under the scratchplate, only lasted a couple of years. Against the odds, a 'marbled' effect finish helped make some of these collectors' items.

At the same time, the Elite Series Strat was introduced, with Alnico pickups with solid covers and a new 'Freeflyte' vibrato bridge which proved universally unpopular. The three-position selector switch was replaced by three push buttons, while a hum-cancelling coil and an active circuit were also standard.

This was almost change for change's sake, underlining the fact that Leo Fender had got it right first time. While the Elite failed to live up to its name, and was only made in 1983 and 1984, examples went on to command good prices on the vintage market for their rarity value. (A Walnut Elite with ebony fingerboard has become especially covetable.)

In reality, the guitar equivalent of rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic achieved nothing. Fender was haemorrhaging money, and liquidation was seriously considered. In 1985, with employment at the Fullerton factory having fallen from a high of 1,100 to just 90 people, CBS sold Fender's name and distribution network for $12.5 million (roughly what they'd paid Leo Fender 20 years earlier) to a group of investors headed by Schultz. The company changed name to Fender Musical Instruments and quality control standards were set to be raised.

There was, however, a major stumbling block. CBS had not included the Fullerton production facility in the deal, forcing Fender to halt US production until a new plant was established in Corona, some 20 miles distant; consequently only Japanese-made instruments appeared in the 1985 catalogue.

Right, a 1983 Elite Strat in rare blue/silver Stratoburst

Enter Japan

Up until the '80s the only genuine Strats had been born in the USA, but the establishment in 1982 of Fender Japan, originally to sell to the Oriental market, opened Pandora's Box.

One of the major factors in Fender's declining profits had been the strength of the dollar, which had hit exports. The other was the rise of the Japanese copy, clones of Strats by ➔

1985	1985	1986	1986	1987	1987	1987	1988	1989
Fender is sold by CBS for $12.5 million	US production temporarily ceases as the Fullerton factory is sold	Fender opens a new plant in Corona, California	Trad-inspired American Standard Stratocaster revives the brand	Strat Plus with Lace Sensor pickups introduced	Squier Stratocaster production switches to Korea	Fender Custom Shop opens for business at Corona	First signature Stratocaster named for Eric Clapton; Yngwie Malmsteen follows	Fender chases the Superstrat market with the HM

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makers like Tokai being very attractively priced in the US due to the self-same exchange rate. Some of these copies would turn out to be superior to their inspirations. Bill Schultz decided to fight fire with fire and suggested making Fenders in Japan, a move that would have massive consequences.

Fender had already dabbled in Far East manufacture in Korea with the Strat-esque Bullet, which appeared on catalogue from 1981 to 1983, but quality issues meant they were forced to ship Korean parts back to the States for assembly. Japanese Strats would be of a different quality entirely.

They were badged both as Fenders and Squiers; first examples of the former were vintage reissues (see box), while, when the US factory failed to hit production targets, Fender Japan filled the gap with the Strat Popular. This was a version of the old 1976 Strat with big headstock, bullet and three-bolt neck which confounded the sceptics by selling in quantity. It was proof that a 'made in Japan' tag on a Fender was no sales disincentive.

In 1984 came the strikingly clean-lined, modern-looking Contemporary Stratocaster, seemingly aimed at the metal market with three variations: humbucker, two humbuckers or humbucker and two single-coils. The headstock was black, and in true metal style the scratchplate was deemed superfluous. This was Fender's first Superstrat, and was also the first MIJ Fender to arrive in the UK.

The name of the Squier company, bought by Fender back in the '60s, would mainly be used in the '80s for cheaper versions of the '57 and '62 reissues. The first of these vintage Squier Strats, known as the JV (Japanese Vintage) series from their serial prefix, had a regular Fender transfer on the headstock, and were produced by FujiGen Gakki. Strats bound for Europe had a smaller 'Squier series' logo added, replacing 'Original Contour Body' on the rounded part; this would change to a larger Squier name with 'by Fender' attached. The Squier JV series gave way in late 1983/early 1984 to the SQ series, based more on '70s Fender models. Squier Strats of the period appeared with many different standards of pickups (some of US manufacture) and electrics, and this needs to be borne in mind when buying secondhand.

In 1987, Squier Strat production switched to Korea. In the words of one expert, 'as soon as Squier had proved itself as a brand and earned a good reputation, it was time to stop playing Tokai and Fernandes at their own game, and make some proper money.' Further lower-priced variations have come from different Far East countries since the '80s, but Japanese Squier Strats, particularly the JVs, have retained their desirability. ↦

Contemporaries, Standards, Bullets... the '87 Squier catalogue

Right: Fender nailed it with the US vintage reissues. This example is an '87

BLASTS FROM THE PAST

Fender's first ever reissue Stratocasters came in two varieties: the '57, with one-ply pickguard and maple neck and a choice of hardtail or vibrato bridge, and the '62, with a rosewood fretboard and three-ply pickguard. The years were chosen arbitrarily; 1957 was a particularly good year for US automobiles, according to Bill Schultz, while 1962 had no disasters or assassinations attached to it!

It's further rumoured that Dan Smith, who oversaw the AVRI (American Vintage Reissue) series with John Page, scoured vintage guitar shops, buying back pristine original Strats to use as templates. Production was scheduled to begin simultaneously at Fullerton and Fender's new Japanese factory, FujiGen, in May 1982, but necessary modernisation work at the American end put them a year behind. Japanese Strats intended for the home market had US-made pickups and Strats from both sources came with period-accurate tweed cases, owners' manuals and a vintage-style 10-foot cable, while their traditional nitrocellulose finish gave them a different look and feel to the polyurethane-coated instruments of the day.

The necks on the '57 and '62 reissue Strats were, however, of the same standard flat cross-section, quite unlike '50s examples, so were not perfect copies of the instruments that inspired them. Still, a relatively modest price tag of $600 encouraged buyers to overlook this: for the first time amateur players could own a decent copy of a vintage classic.

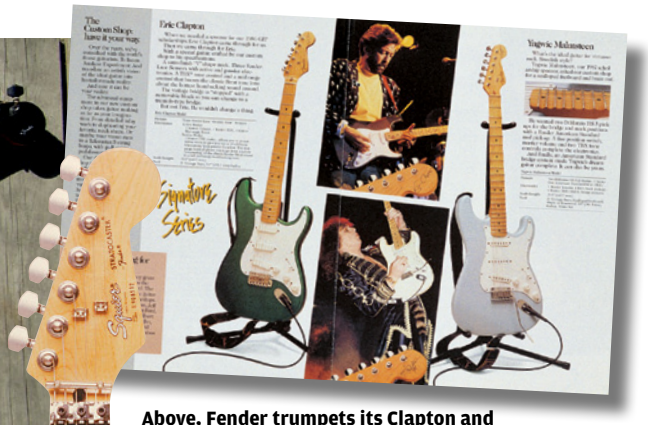
The '57 and '62 were briefly, from 1987 to 1989, made available in 'Mary Kaye' translucent blond finish with gold hardware, as sported by the '50s star of that name who appeared in Fender catalogues of the time with her Trio.

Fender Japan introduced a '72 Strat replica in 1986 and a '68 two years later, the former also being made available in Paisley Red and Blue Flower patterns for the more extrovert (if not necessarily fashion-conscious) Stratophile.

The AVRI Strat series lasted until 2012, when Fender discontinued the long-running '57 and '62 and introduced '56, '59 and '65 models. This length of time, unprecedented in modern Fender history, confirms its importance. The Fullerton-manufactured 1982-'84 examples are now particularly sought-after.

It's hard to overestimate the impact of this move to reproduce classic guitars of the past, a strategy we now take for granted. Perhaps surprisingly, new instruments intended to evoke a vintage vibe failed to have a downward effect on sales – and prices – of the 'real thing', instead giving people the taste without the price tag.

Totally '80s: a Fender HM Strat in shocking pink with HSS pickups


Above, Fender trumpets its Clapton and Malmsteen signature Strats in 1987

Fender reacted to Jackson, Charvel, Kramer and Ibanez by offering the HM Strat with an added bridge humbucker

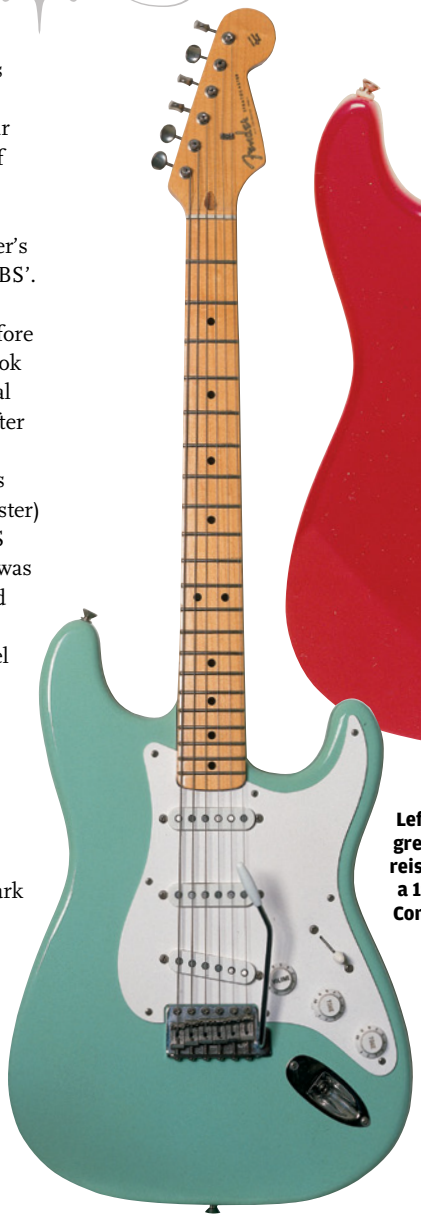
When founder Leo Fender had sold his company to the Columbia Broadcasting System two decades earlier, guitarists' fear that instruments made under the aegis of such a large conglomerate whose diverse activities included television, radio and a record label would not match up to Fender's previous standards led to the term 'pre-CBS'. This has since been used to justify the premium prices of instruments made before the takeover date. The term 'post-CBS' took longer to catch on, but there was a general acceptance that Fender raised its game after 1985 – some would say not before time.

The American Standard series of Strats (effectively a re-named Standard Stratocaster) was a 'back to basics' declaration once US production resumed in 1986. Simplicity was the key, the most notable 'tweak' a revised bridge-vibrato unit similar to the original but with powder-coated cast stainless steel saddles and two fulcrum points.

As the new Corona plant increased in capacity, exchange rates finally started to favour American-made guitars. Fender was on its way back.

Superstrat stories

If the American Standard was a benchmark and the vintage reissues were finding an appreciative audience, the late-'80s Strat story was all about chasing trends. The major one was the so-called Superstrat, a term referring to Strat-shaped guitars with humbuckers rather than traditional single-coils. This would become the most popular hybrid of the '80s – but the rewards would mostly be reaped by Fender's rivals.


Left: seafoam green 1987 '57 reissue. Above, a 1987 Squier Contemporary Strat

It all started with Eddie Van Halen, the first guitar hero of the decade. His first 'name' instrument had been a 1958 Stratocaster, but he felt its single-coils didn't give him a meaty enough sound. The Gibson ES-335 failed on image grounds and lacked the Strat's all-important 'whammy-bar', so he built the first Superstrat with a single humbucking pickup near the bridge and just one knob, a volume control, from $130 worth of spare parts.

Just as PRS would later steal Gibson's thunder by improving on the Les Paul, companies like Jackson, Charvel, Kramer and Ibanez produced Superstrats that, by the end of the decade, had far overtaken the original in popularity.

US Fender belatedly reacted in 1988 by offering the HM (heavy metal) Strat with a bridge humbucker and a black-finished headstock with larger logo. This quickly mutated into a second version with two humbuckers, then one Lace Sensor pickup and one humbucker, with a Telecaster-style pickguard; a final variation boasted two single coils and a humbucker.

Locking tremolos were another flavour of the decade, and the Strat also experimented with these, initially on the previously mentioned Japanese-built Contemporary Strat of 1985. Fender would acquire distribution rights for tremolo specialists Floyd Rose in 1991, and the Superstrat battles would continue in the coming decade.

The Japanese arm of Fender came up with some interesting variations on the Strat theme as the Eighties came to an end. A short-scale instrument with a 24" neck, 22 frets and just two (volume and tone) controls was introduced in 1989, while the Strat XII, from the year before, was – as its name suggests – a 12-string version.

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Signature Strats

Introduced in the '80s, signature guitars endorsed by famous players would drive the Stratocaster's future development, innovations requested by the stars finding their way to the wider market. An example of this was the 1987 Strat Plus, originally intended as a Jeff Beck signature model, which introduced low-noise Lace Sensor pickups and a Wilkinson roller nut designed to reduce friction from whammy-arm use. (Beck's Strat would eventually come to fruition in the following decade.)

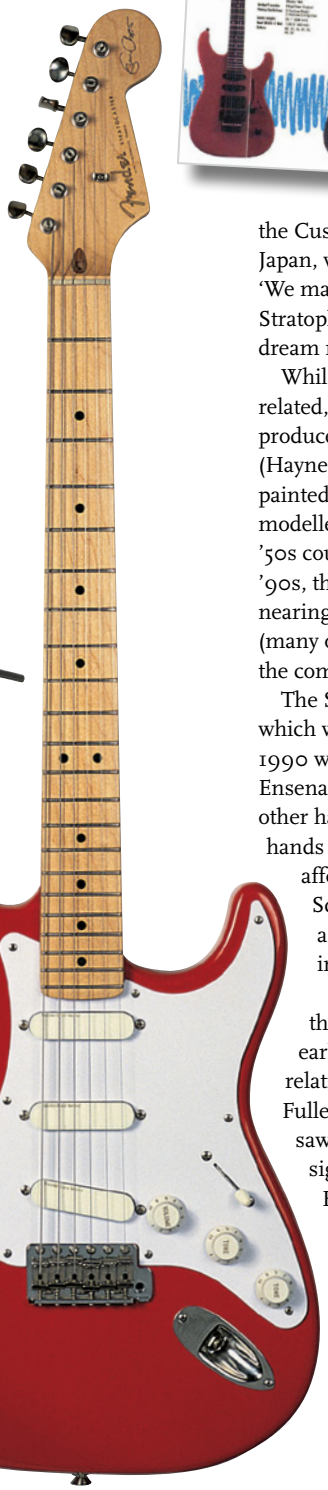
The first signature Strat to appear, made for Eric Clapton in 1988, featured three Lace Sensor (later Vintage Noiseless) pickups, active mid-boost circuit and V-neck profile. Its vintage-style tremolo was blocked-off to resemble a hard tail, as was Clapton's personal preference.

Alongside this was one built to the personal specification of Yngwie J Malmsteen with a lightweight, deep-contoured body and his trademark scalloped neck. The Swede also stipulated the use of DiMarzio stacked humbuckers at bridge and neck; such upgrades were also favoured by metal stars like Glenn Tipton of Judas Priest and Dave Murray of Iron Maiden.

Talking of pickups, Lace Sensors would be offered as options on Strats from then onwards. Their name came from designer Don Lace, and the idea was to minimise the hum that was inherent with non-humbucking (ie single-coil) pickups. This noise problem had long dogged the Strat, and the pickups' popularity to this day suggests they fulfilled a need.

The other innovation the decade brought that still drives the Strat today was the Custom Shop, which opened at the new Corona factory in 1987 as a way to fulfil one-off orders and limited runs of special models. Closet classic, NOS (new old stock) and relic'd options would later become available, all at premium prices. Much of the Custom Shop's initial business came from Japan, where it was marketed with the slogan 'We make your dreams come true', but Stratophiles worldwide now partake of these dream machines.

Fender relocated 24 miles east of the original Fullerton factory to Corona in 1986 and remains there to this day



Left, a Squier HM II Strat from 1989; right, the popular Clapton Strat

While its debut output was Telecaster-related, the Custom Shop's first Strat, produced in an edition of 500, was the HLE (Haynes Limited Edition) of 1989. Gold-painted with matching hardware, it was modelled on the Strat of Homer Haynes of '50s country duo Homer & Jethro. By the early '90s, the Custom Shop's annual output was nearing 3,000, these high-priced guitars (many of them Strats) contributing greatly to the company's bottom line.

The Stratocaster's worldwide manufacture, which would gain another pin on the map in 1990 when Fender Mexico set up shop in Ensenada, arguably diluted the brand. On the other hand, it put a classic design in the hands of many who could never have afforded 'the real thing'... and many Squier players would graduate to Fender as their expertise and disposable income grew.

The '80s will never be talked about as the Strat's golden decade – and, while early Japan-built Squiers have their fans, relatively few '80s instruments outside Fullerton-built AVRIs and the oddities that saw brief production spells have shown signs of becoming seriously collectable. But trends that began then, like vintage reissues, signature models and the Custom Shop, continue today.

Leo Fender, the man who started it all, passed away in 1991, shortly after the '80s ended, knowing that, despite some strange twists and turns during the decade, the Strat remained alive and well.

Right: 1989 catalogue for the American Standard

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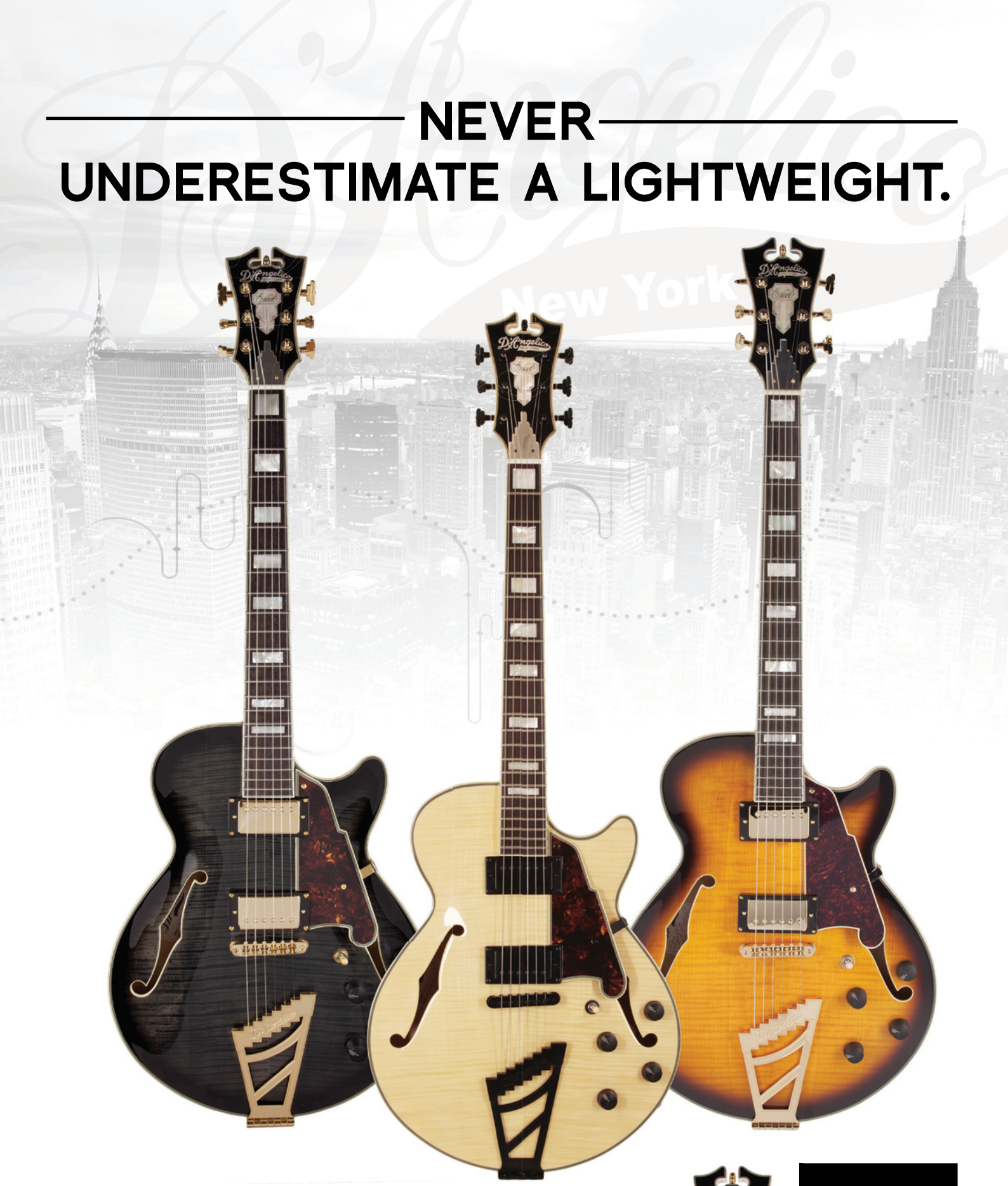

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Pride AND JOY

Famed guitarist and producer Chris Spedding has rifled through his phone book and gathered a host of famous names for a cracking solo album. Interview by **Rik Flynn**

'Joyland's always open. It's a door that never closes... it's a ticket so hot that it burns your palms. Where the feast goes on and the lines get longer everyday. They can never go home. YOU can never go home. If I had it my way, we'd burn the whole place down...' The instantly recognisable voice of Ian McShane – screen star of *Lovejoy* and *Deadwood* – sets the tone for Chris Spedding's 13th studio album. Somewhere in amongst the frantic whispers, maniacal laughter and distant ghost-train screams, a warm, spacious riff from Spedding's guitar surfaces and we're immediately hooked deep into the expansive aural experience offered up by *Joyland*.

'It was an instrumental that I'd had lying around not knowing what to do with it and then, with Ian's help, it became the theme of *Joyland*. It's a dystopic sort of idea,' Spedding explains. 'That's why it opens the album. We tried reciting the words ourselves and it didn't happen at all until we got him involved... that's why he's the professional actor!'

We love a good concept here at *G&B*, and this one does its damndest not to let you go, spreading out across even-keel rock, open-plain western, surf instrumental, rootsy blues, soul and plenty of oaky-voiced charm. It's a project that's turned the tables for Spedding, now 70 years old. Renowned as the seasoned session guy called upon by many of the greats – Bryan Ferry and Roxy Music, Herbie Flowers, John Cale, Elton John, Mike Batt, Harry Nilsson, Roger Daltrey and Paul McCartney amongst them – Spedding has finally called in the favours and utilised some big-hitters for this latest solo venture. Arthur Brown breathes life into *Now You See It*, Glen Matlock steadies the low end on *Café Racer*, Bryan Ferry sings of death and deserts in *Gun Shaft City*, Johnny Marr offers a refined solo in *Heisenberg*, Robert Gordon joins in for a co-write, Andy Mackay helps reinvent Crispian St Peters' 1966 hit *The Pied Piper* with – of all things – some oboe, and bassist Andy Fraser and young vocalist Lane are in attendance too. 'It was my label Cleopatra's idea to do an album with guests... and, thinking back, it makes a lot of sense,' says Spedding. 'I'm known as the guy who plays for lots of different people, so why not have lots of different people on my album? I hadn't ever thought of it before.'

Wishlist in hand, Chris set about realising his musical imagination with the help of ex-Sharks bandmate Steve Parsons. The influences on show run deep and wide, but what else would one expect from a guitarist who earned his stripes the old school way? Spedding served his early apprenticeship playing standards and showtunes with the Nat Temple band in the '60s – a crash course in Gilbert and Sullivan, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, ➔

Photo: Mike Prior

Gear

Guitars
Gretsch 6120, Fernandes Dragonfly Elite, Gibson Les Paul Custom, Fender Stratocaster and Telecaster, Gibson Flying V, Gibson SG Jr, James Trussart Steel Paul, Gretsch Country Club, Gibson J-200, Eko 12-string, Fender Precision bass

Amps
Fender Deluxe Reverb

Effects
Line 6, Amplitube

Photo: Mike Prior

Chris Spedding with Trussart: 'I was lucky... Jimmy Page left sessions to do Led Zeppelin'

Richard Rodgers and the like – before immersing himself in session work. 'The guys in those bands can play any song in any key, and they're really good musicians,' he says. 'I certainly never regret going through that scene, even though some would dismiss it as corny. Once you've learned your first 500 songs, you hear a song and you can more or less pick it up 'cos you recognise the formula. Your ear gets attuned to it. My name started to get around as a guitar player... I was starting to leave the Nat Temple scene behind.'

By the end of the '60s he was with the Battered Ornaments ('a band of anarchic dropouts') with whom he played the Rolling Stones' infamous Hyde Park show before landing a job with Cream bassist Jack Bruce.

'When I first heard Eric Clapton – a few years earlier – I thought, "Wow, this guy's really got that shit together. If I'm going to make any kind of impression, I'd better go the opposite direction." As luck would have it Jack Bruce was looking for a new guitarist after Eric, and there I was... somebody who didn't play like Eric Clapton. Just a bit of serendipity there, I guess.'

A period moonlighting with jazz-outfit Nucleus furthered his reputation, albeit in a slightly backward way. 'I think all the [session] fixers thought that if you played with a jazz group then you could do pretty much anything – but I was the rock element in Nucleus. I hadn't told anybody I couldn't read music. I thought if I got something I couldn't play, it wasn't my fault, it was the fault of the guy that booked me! I used to wait for the session where I got caught out, but it never came.

'There were players who could play anything you put in front of them first time, but that wasn't the type of thing you wanted on a rock session. The producer would come running in and say, "That's exactly what I wanted, I just didn't know how to write it down. Book that man again!" So I got a lot of work that way. Plus, I was lucky – Jimmy Page had just left sessions to do Led Zeppelin and Big Jim Sullivan had left the scene to do Tom Jones in Vegas, so I was able to step right in.'

Nucleus gave him a further leg up when, in 1970, he won second place in *Melody Maker*'s Best Jazz Guitarist Poll – a list he would occupy for some years afterwards. By now, with a multitude of sessions under his belt from rockabilly with Robert Gordon and prog with Bruce through to classic pop with Roxy and Elton and soundtrack work for Jeff Wayne's *War Of The Worlds*, Spedding was a guitar name to be reckoned with. He wasn't averse to donning a costume as Wellington in The Wombles, either – complete with a Flying V slung around his neck. Perhaps it's an ability to remain open-minded, to mould seamlessly to any job, that makes a truly 'great' guitarist.

Not that Spedding has always remained stage right. Despite failure with the Sharks – 'my only serious attempt at being part of a group' – he had chart success in his own right with 1975's smash hit *Motorbikin'*.

'One of my last sessions before the Sharks was with Donovan, produced by Mickie Most. I'd be coming up with ideas and he'd say "Just shut up. This is not a Spedding record, this is a Donovan record!" I remembered thinking, "I need somebody to do this for me." For *Motorbikin'* I went to Mickie because he got stuff out of me that nobody ever had before. I looked at the charts and thought, "This is a load of old rubbish." It needed a bit of a throwback to Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran and the Ace Cafe. I was inspired by the rock'n'roll that inspired me when I was 12 years old.'

Spedding's bequiffed rockabilly swagger when he performed *Motorbikin'* on *Top Of The Pops* led to pivotal meetings with Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood. 'They had a store called Let It Rock – before it was Sex – the only place where you could get retro clothing without it being vintage. Vivienne made a lot of stuff for me. It was a two-way thing; they saw me as someone that might be receptive to what they were doing with the Sex Pistols because they were also a bit anti the current scene. Everybody else on that *TOTP* show was wearing platform boots and flared pants – Roy Wood with the green beard, David Bowie and T-Rex – and I came on with the greasy hair and a leather jacket. This was in 1975, about a year before punk happened, so I can see why they thought I'd fit.'

GOUGE AWAY

Spedding provided the bass playing for most of *Joyland* too – excluding guest spots from Glen Matlock and Andy Fraser – and once again using a 'modified' instrument.

'I have an old 1961 Fender Precision and I gouged a great big hole out of it to fit a Guild humbucking pickup in, right next to the bridge. Vintage guitar experts would be totally horrified to see it, but I find that Fender pickups are under-powered and don't drive the amplifier enough to get enough compression for a nice smooth sound.

'There's a lot of extraneous clunks that you have to EQ out, so it's been the pickup I've used since the early '70s.'

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Listen up

CHRIS SPEDDING
Joyland
(2015)
Far-flung influences, fretting finery and guest appearances including Bryan Ferry and Johnny Marr make for an engrossing dozen, all flavoured by a dystopian theme

CHRIS SPEDDING
Pearls
(2011)
Deft and rhythmic throughout and with a splash of everything in Spedding's arsenal, *Pearls* occupies a similar space to *Joyland* – just as eclectic, just as good

CHRIS SPEDDING
The Very Best Of Chris Spedding
(2005)
A great overview of Spedding's plentiful work across the years that includes his 1975 smash *Motorbikin'*

KING MOB
Force 9
(2011)
A retro-tinted rockin' record that somehow didn't quite cut through. The line-up features Glen Matlock, hot guitarist Sixteen, Japanese bassist Toshi Ogawa, and Martin Chambers on drums

So Spedding moved to the other side of the desk to guide the Pistols through their first demo. 'Chrissie Hynde knew Vivienne and Malcolm, and she took me down to the 100 Club. There were about 15 people in the audience, and by the end of the show there were about five! I offered to do the demo because I was meeting people who were frightened of them and thought they were terrible even though they'd never seen them. I thought "Something's wrong here." We recorded three songs so that the people who wouldn't dare come to a gig would get to hear the band – and they ended up on the front page of *Melody Maker* without ever having had a record out.'

As it turned out, the Pistols weren't frightening in real life. 'They were as good as gold. They showed up on time and played perfectly. We did three songs in five hours, all mixed. They'd never been in the studio before. I told them to run through the first song and didn't put the red light on, but I recorded it, and it was perfect. I gave them all cassettes that ended up on the bootlegs. That's why they sounded so grungy... the master tapes sounded pretty good.'

Rumours soon circulated that it was Spedding, not Steve Jones, that played on those recordings. 'Why would I record a band with a guitarist who couldn't play!?' he points out. 'It's been the bane of my life! I think it's 'cos they used my amp...'

A completely different direction arrived with the recording of *War Of The Worlds*, which eventually went on the road in 2006. 'On that show there were no amps on stage – it was a Line 6 direct into the board. I had a problem trying to get the sustain that I got in the studio – which I got by turning my Deluxe Reverb up full – so I had to use the Fernandes sustainer guitar, which saved my life! There was another guy playing the "heat ray" that had to be created artificially using loads of fuzzboxes, but for my lead I just had two presets on the Line 6: a fairly quiet one that slotted in behind the narration and 5 per cent louder one for featured solos.'

Guitar modeling was central to the recording of *Joyland* too. 'I make that concession to modernity, although we tried to make it sound like an old-school recording. The engineer turned me onto Amplitube. I did it all at home apart from the drums, which were recorded with Andy Newmark in his studio, so I couldn't have an amp on full blast – that's the only reason.'

In 2011 Spedding found himself in the ranks of King Mob, with Glen Matlock on bass – a band who sadly crashed out after one superb album. 'There's a couple of King Mob outtakes on *Joyland* with King Mob's guitarist Sixteen and Martin Chambers, the drummer. We'd started a new album but thought we'd better forget the whole thing... it was wrong place, wrong time. We had some pretty good tracks so we cleaned them up to make them fit in with the rest. They were the only tracks where it was a band playing full out.'

Another standout guest spot comes from Johnny Marr, resplendent on the *Breaking Bad*-inspired instrumental *Heisenberg*. 'I met Johnny playing with Bryan Ferry. We had a lot in common so he was pleased to do it. I did an instrumental because the way composers earn money these days is to get something in a movie or on TV. It has that whole "wide open spaces" sort of feel to it. It's the sort of thing that I'm hoping Quentin Tarantino will pick up on!'

Spedding's choices: Les Paul Custom, modded Gretsch 6120, Trussart Steel Paul

Photo: Mike Prior

A second instrumental, surf rocker *Café Racer*, is a nod in the direction of *Motorbikin'*, while his other favourite is the beautiful Al Green-inspired *I Still Love You*, a cut penned with Robert Gordon. 'We wrote that a long time ago when I was living in New York. Robert doesn't often get the chance to sing that kind of thing. At the time he was having a fight with his girlfriend and those phone calls that he was talking about in the lyric were actually going on when we were writing it. I tried to go in a different direction with the guitar. I used a Strat for it. I always like to have a Strat in case I want that glassy, cleaner sound.'

> *'The 6120 has P90s, so it sounds like a Gibson but looks like a Gretsch. It's perfect'*

Spedding's No. 1 for *Joyland* was his Gretsch 6120, but his love of the Gibson tone led to a major refit. 'I like Scotty Moore's sound and I've played a Gibson ever since I realised that he played one. It was a very fat sound as opposed to a Fender sound or the Cliff Gallup Gretsch sound, which I found a bit cold and thin. I was still playing a Tele when I was with Nucleus; I didn't get into a Gibson until about 1971. There was a great session player, Alan Parker, who played a Les Paul Custom, so I got one just like his at Top Gear in Denmark St.

'More recently I got this brand new Gretsch 6120 which I modified with P90s – they look great on it and they sound good too. It sounds like a Gibson, but looks like a Gretsch. It's perfect.'

Much like his trusty 6120, Spedding still pulls off that debonair look to a tee and still sounds as good as he ever has. Take Ian McShane's word for it, *Joyland* is most certainly one hot ticket.

Background image: Jakko Jakszyk (King Crimson). Photo: Jordan McLachlan

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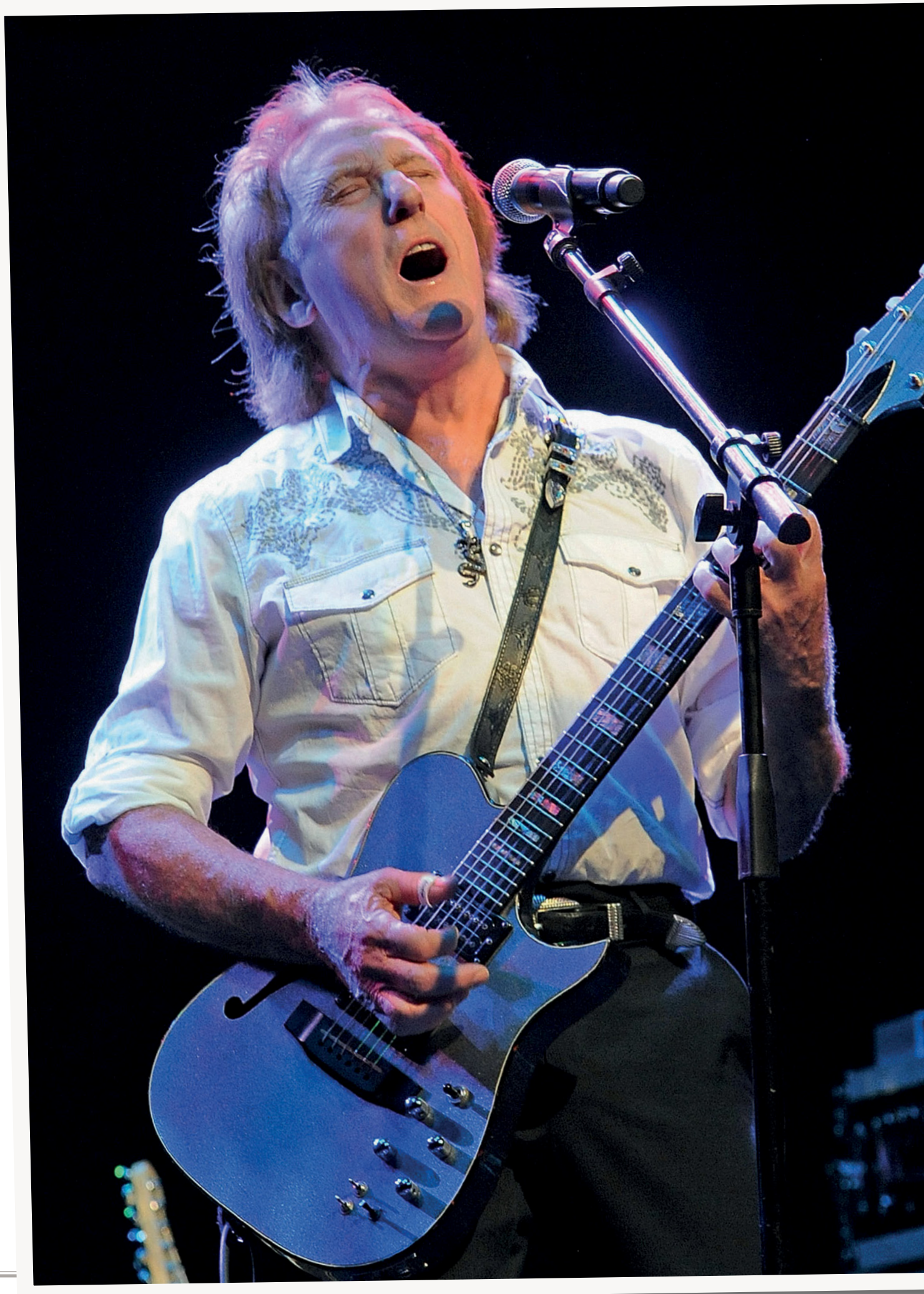

Photo: Bobby Bank/Getty Images

THE Wanderer

Gliding on pop's strongest winds for decades, Denny Laine enjoyed chart triumphs with the Moody Blues and Wings, and functioned successfully as a solo entertainer. His mercurial career is chronicled by **Alan Clayson**

On the home page of www.dennylaine.com you'll be greeted with the sound of *Go Now*, the 1965 million-seller by the Moody Blues that lifted singing guitarist Denny Laine off the runway. He was to notch up even heftier achievements in Paul McCartney's Wings, and another hit by proxy when Colin Blunstone's revival of Laine's *Say You Don't Mind*, a turntable hit in 1967, reached the UK Top 20 five years later. Yet these are only some of the conspicuous milestones of a professional life governed by Laine's restless nature. 'That's what I tend to do,' he reflects, 'get into a band, and then it gets busy... and you want to get away from it all again.

'That's what happened with the Moodies and Wings. Enough was enough. I like to try my hand at other things – things you can't do when you're in a band. One of my earliest inspirations was the "Allan-A-Dale" character played by Elton Hayes in the 1954 movie *The Story Of Robin Hood And His Merrie Men*. He was a wandering minstrel with his guitar.'

This vocational wanderlust may have come from Romany blood on Laine's father's side. Moreover, the family were not unacquainted with a travelling life as his maternal grandfather had been a music hall trouper, and his elder sister was already training to be a dancer when Denny was born Brian Frederick Hines in Birmingham on 29th October 1944.

By the age of 12, he'd become a sufficiently competent acoustic guitarist to play local functions with 'Django Reinhardt gypsy-jazz stuff' on a Spanish model with gut strings, but an appearance at a prestigious festival in 1959 had him performing the skiffle standard *Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavour* on a steel-strung Levin. Not long afterwards, he adopted his stage alias as a homage to Cleo Laine – and it was to be a moment of supreme satisfaction when, much later, Jacqui Dankworth, the jazz diva's daughter, participated in *Arctic Song*, a turn-of-the century musical Denny composed with environmentalist Chris Hill.

This, however, all lay in the future. After buying an electric guitar of indeterminate make, Denny joined Johnny and the Dominators as their 'Buddy Holly specialist'. He was also the juvenile attraction in a palais big band before emerging as self-appointed leader of a band called the Diplomats. When a date schedule in which a list that had once signified a month's work became a week's, Denny Laine and the Diplomats became full-time musicians in 1963.

Gear

Guitars

Carvin AE 185, Ibanez doubleneck, Gibson Les Pauls including a 1952 model ('because I prefer the wider neck of the early instruments'), Fender Stratocaster Gretsch 6120., Acoustics: Martin, Takamine

Amps & FX

Carvin and Fender Twin, Boss ME80 multi-FX

Denny Laine with his koa-topped Carvin AE185 hybrid electric

However, though they got as far as taping self-composed demos for EMI, they'd reached much the same impasse as the Beatles before Brian Epstein entered the picture – so much so that, in shaking off provincial fetters, Laine left his Diplomats to fend for themselves in April 1964, and formed the Moody Blues instead.

'I pushed the group in the direction of the blues- and jazz-based London bands,' says Denny. 'I'd seen the Spencer Davis Group, and was knocked out by them. I thought that if they could get away with it, we could.'

DENNY'S DIPLOMATIC LUNCH

Recorded in Nashville, the finale of Wings' 1975 album *Venus And Mars* was a jaw-dropping version of Tony Hatch's theme to *Crossroads*, the long-running ITV soap opera, set in a Midlands hotel and broadcast between the news In Welsh and *Children's Hour* – and, surmised McCartney, 'just the kind of thing lonely old people watch'. It was flattery of a kind that the Wings version of *Crossroads* was churned out sometimes (usually after an episodic cliffhanger) over the closing credits in the decade before the original series finally went off the air in 1988.

'Meg Mortimer', the series' central character, was played by Noele Gordon, former host of *Lunchbox*, the lightest of ITV's light entertainment shows, on which Denny Laine and the Diplomats had appeared on several afternoons in 1963.

Their televisual debut, however, had been on regional news magazine *Midlands At Six*. Because *Thank Your Lucky Stars* and other ITV pop programmes – and the BBC Light Programme's *Saturday Club* – were all recorded in Birmingham, Denny and his group were well-placed to be hired for two sub-*Thank Your Lucky Stars* pop showcases, *For Teenagers Only* and *Pop Shop*.

In parenthesis, in his office as Pye's recording manager, Tony Hatch signed Nicky James, one of the Diplomats' 'featured vocalists', for a one-shot single in late 1963, and rubbed his chin over Laine and the rest of the combo when, like other London talent scouts, he was scouring British cities other than passe Liverpool for the next Beatles.

This would be demonstrated in Birmingham Town Hall on 11 September 1964 when audience grooved to Blue Sounds from Leeds, the jazzy Sheffields, and Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated. Representing the Second City itself were the Spencer Davis Group – and, wrote regional pop gazette *Midland Beat*, 'the much-improved Moody Blues Five'.

The quintet continued to improve to the degree that its second single, an overhaul of US soul star Bessie Banks' *Go Now*, was a domestic #1 in January 1965. However, there were to be but three more Top 50 penetrations by this edition of the Moody Blues.

The second of these, *From The Bottom Of My Heart* – written by Denny and pianist Mike Pinder – remains perhaps, the most exquisite track the group ever made. 'It was done in a four-track studio at the back of the Marquee club', recollects Denny, 'which had a parquet floor that created great natural echo. My 12-string sounded really big.' He also delivered a remarkable vocal which developed from a muttered prelude to a howling, wordless coda, as if what was being expressed was too intense for orthodox verbal articulation.

A year-long vinyl silence preceded October 1966's *Boulevard De La Madeleine*, which wove the tango into the rich tapestry of British beat. By this point booking fees had fallen drastically, so Laine, deciding he couldn't be worse off solo, decided to make changes, coming up with the idea of doing a 'folky, acoustic-style thing, but with strings'. For a few months, he was backed both on the boards and for two singles – *Say You Don't Mind* and 1968's *Too Much In Love* – by the Electric String Band, an amplified string quartet from the Royal Academy of Music ('technicians', Denny called them) plus a drummer and an electric bass player. 'It was a bit of a nightmare actually,' he admits. 'The technicians didn't find it easy, but a lot of good ideas came from them.'

On taking stock, he tried again as one of Balls, a so-called 'supergroup' risen from the ashes of the Ugly's, a struggling Midlands act led by vocalist Steve Gibbons. It also contained guitarist Trevor Burton, formerly of the Move. After the change of name, the outfit uprooted to a bungalow in the Hampshire village of Fordingbridge – and, later, to a farmhouse near Reading – much as trendy Traffic had to their isolated cottage on the Berkshire Downs. An exploratory bash at a parish hall was encouraging, and a lucrative record company advance was promised. By then, Denny had been roped in – so Burton was led to believe – to thrum his Fender Precision bass, but, according to Laine, 'we were to swap instruments around, and bring different people in for different things.

After an erratic string of college bookings as an acoustic trio of Laine, Gibbons and Burton, that was the end of that. 'Then Ginger Baker [former drummer with Blind Faith] asked me to join Airforce. It was a shambles – too many players all trying to outdo one another, not enough discipline.'

As well as percussion, Baker's post-Blind Faith big band was heavy with under-employed Brummies – Burton and two of Traffic, as well as Denny – and Birmingham Town Hall was a fitting debut venue. Most stuck it out for just one more engagement – at the Royal Albert Hall – captured on tape. From this was salvaged a single, Bob Dylan's *Man Of* ➔

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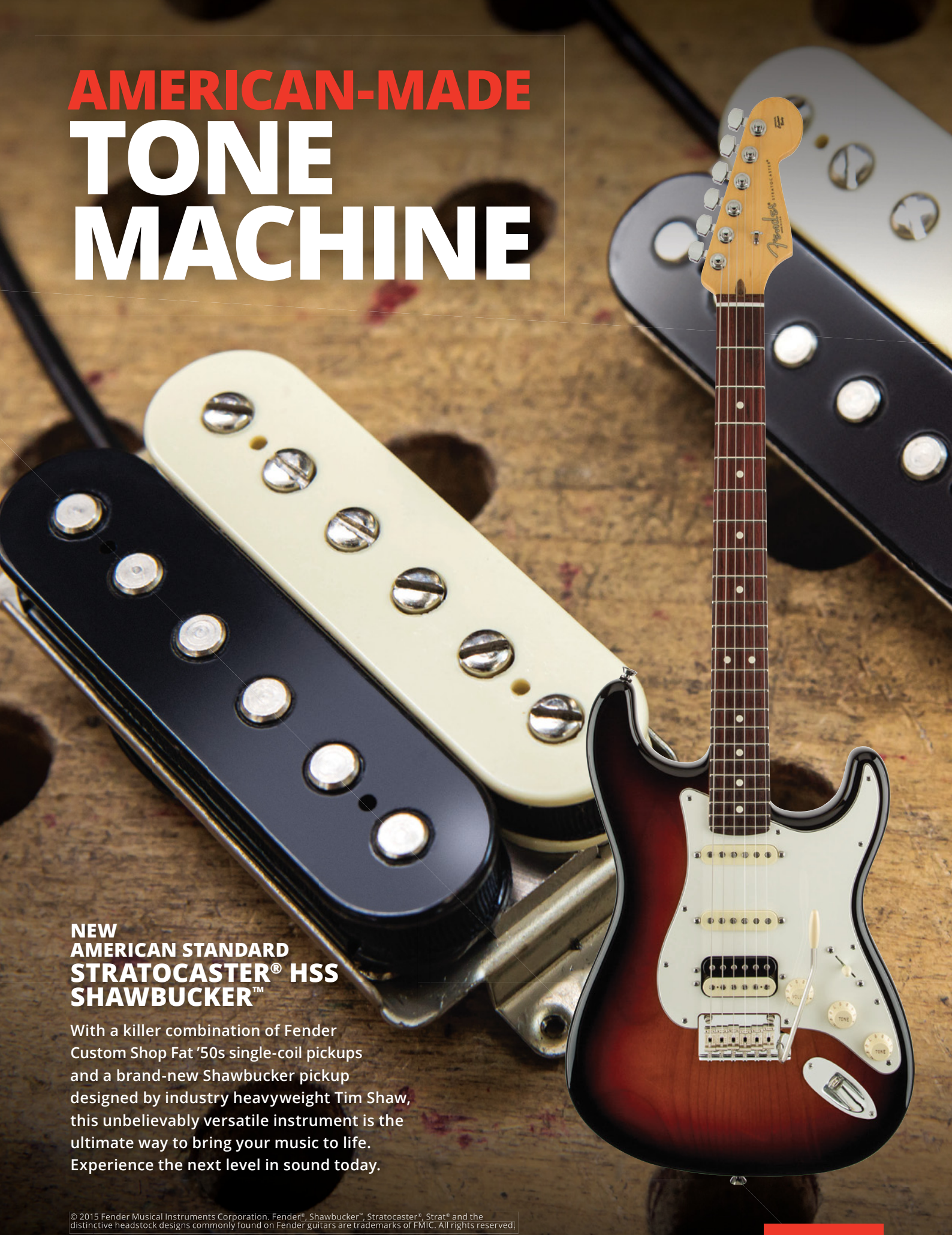

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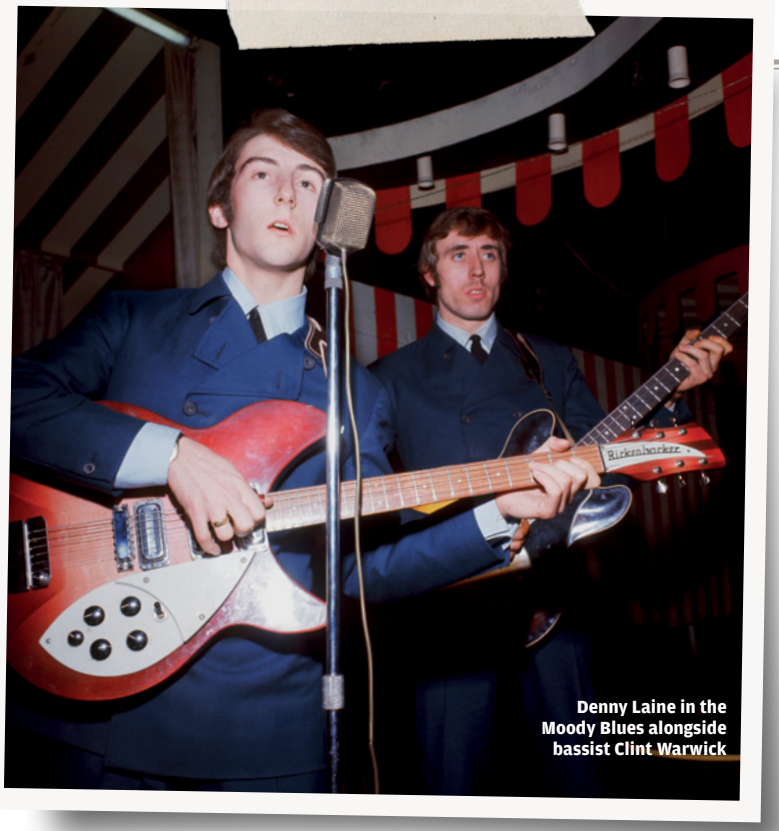
Photo: Keystone/Getty Images

Denny Laine in the Moody Blues alongside bassist Clint Warwick

Listen up

THE MOODY BLUES
The Magnificent Moodies
(1965)
R&B and soul mingle with originals like *Stop*, covered by UK package tour regular Julie Grant

DENNY LAINE
Master Suite
(1988)
An unfussed and piquant demonstration of fretboard dexterity concerns subtlety rather than high velocity flash

DENNY LAINE
Arctic Song
(2000)
***The Ghost Of The Scrimshaw Carver*, a Laine in-concert favourite, is among this soundtrack album's highlights**

And another thing...

Straight after the Moody Blues, Denny studied the art of flamenco guitar, principally with some gypsy players in an Andalusian village. Years later, he fronted a band of local artists for a tour of Spain

Constant Sorrow, sung in Laine's fully-developed 'hurt' style. By the time this was issued on 45 in autumn 1970, Airforce had crash-landed. 'But a couple of months later,' smiles Denny, 'I got a call from Paul.'

McCartney and Laine first met when Denny Laine and the Diplomats had supported the Beatles early in 1962, and each had since stayed in the picture about the other's activities. 'Paul knew I could sing, write and play, and so he rang me. It knocked me sideways a little because I wasn't used to being a sidekick. That was the first time I'd been with a band with someone more famous than me.'

> *'Paul knew I could sing, write and play, so he called me. It knocked me sideways'*

Nonetheless, *Wild Life*, Wings' maiden album, stalled on the edge of the Top 10 in both Britain and the USA – a comedown by the ex-Beatle's previous commercial standards.

'The longer you go on, the tougher it is in lots of ways,' ponders Laine. 'I'd been through the same kind of stuff myself. People tend to expect more and more of you. For Paul, having been in the best rock'n'roll band in history, it must have been very heavy. It took us ages to become a good band... partly because we kept changing personnel.'

As always, Denny kept changing guitars too. Among those used over the years before most of his collection was stolen by a lately-dismissed road manager were a Gibson Howard Roberts jazz guitar, a Gibson-built Kalamazoo, a Contreras classical, a Travis Bean ('with a metal neck and the most amazing sustain') and a Gibson SG doubleneck (heard on *Band On The Run*).

During the gaps between recordings and tours, it was quite in order for Wings' musicians to undertake individual projects – as Laine did with his *Guitar Book* tutor manual (Whizzard Press, 1979) and, on disc, a 1973 solo LP, *Ahh... Laine*. Three years later, McCartney oversaw *Holly Days* – and its spin-off singles, *It's So Easy* and *Moondreams* – whereby Laine paid his respects to the bespectacled Texan who'd been one of his and Paul's boyhood idols. The album was crafted in homespun fashion at McCartney's rural bolt-hole on Strathclyde's Mull of Kintyre, a desolate peninsula shortly to become known to a wider public than it might have warranted.

When Wings convened in autumn 1977 to create its sixth studio album, *London Town*, the ensemble had been pared down to just the McCartneys and Denny Laine, who was now plucking a 1959 Gretsch Duo-Jet, purchased from Pete Townshend after its use on the Who's *Quadrophenia*. During the sessions, Denny and Paul penned a stand-alone single, *Mull Of Kintyre* – which, whistled by milkmen from Dover to Downpatrick, became the kingdom's biggest selling single ever. In its wake, *London Town* fared more modestly, as did *Wings Greatest*, and also *Back To The Egg*, which had already fallen from the UK chart when, on the eve of a Wings tour – subsequently cancelled – of Japan, McCartney spent over a week in a Tokyo jail.

The fact that Laine flew back to England two days after the arrest in January 1980 may have struck Paul as disloyal. As well as that, while his glorious leader's freedom was hanging in the balance, Laine preoccupied himself with another solo LP with a topical title track, *Japanese Tears*. Thus the seeds were sown for the break-up of Wings in 1981 when Denny Laine, perhaps not deemed sufficiently current in output or post-punk attitude, dropped off the mainstream pop radar.

Nevertheless, hard work and dogged country-by-country pursuit of contracts was to yield subsequent releases as worthy artistically as any he'd yet recorded. The most notable are 1982's *Anyone Can Fly* – available only in Germany; 1985's *Hometown Girls*, a 'concept' offering; the all-instrumental *Master Suite* – on which Laine plays a customised Carvin AE185, attractive for both its acoustic and electric possibilities – and *Arctic Song*.

Since then, a snail-paced recording career has resulted chiefly in retrospectives, but *Valley Of Dreams*, an album years in gestation, is expected soon – and excerpts from this on YouTube intimate that Denny Laine's return to at least a qualified contemporary prominence might not be entirely out of the question.

Special thanks to Denny Laine and Ian Drummond

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Club Series Steer Cutaway

Nothing brightens up our day like a quirky British-designed guitar, and the Burns Steer reissue combines tradition with weirdness in a unique way. **Marcus Leadley** takes the bullock by the horns

Jim Burns designed a lot of guitars during his long and illustrious career. The original Steer dates from the early 1980s; legend has it that only 40 were produced, and one of these subsequently became Billy Bragg's favourite instrument. Later, when the Steer was reissued in the late 1990s, its unusual looks and tonal flexibility attracted players like Phil Solem of the Rembrandts and Earl Slick.

There are a few differences between the original model, the first reissues, and the new version we have on the test. While the build and electrics have remained fundamentally the same throughout ('80s models had a smaller Burns single coil pickup, not a Tri-Sonic, in the neck position), the bridge was initially an integral part of a large metal plate that also held the pickups – a format that loosely echoed the design of the Fender Telecaster. There was also a metal front-plate for the headstock, and the instrument only existed in a non-cutaway form.

Since the 1990s, Steer bridges have been separate units attached directly to the guitar's body. A cutaway version was also introduced, and this has become by far the best-selling model. While the basic specification remains the same today as for the Korean-built guitars of the early 2000s, today's Steer is manufactured in China – and, Burns says, to a higher standard. Final assembly and set up is carried out at Burns London's UK workshop. The guitars also feature improved, handwound pickups.

All-maple neck with sealed machineheads

Hollowed body keeps the weight to less than 8lbs

The original Steer dates from the early '80s. Only 40 were made; one became Billy Bragg's favourite instrument

There's nothing 'me too' about a Steer. The simplistic 'Spanish guitar' body shape conceals a routed and chambered interior that remains innovative to this day. It isn't exactly a semi-acoustic, and nor is it simply a chambered solidbody, as the acoustic-like soundhole vents the chamber – and it is most certainly not an electro-acoustic. The neck has a uniquely British feel and the high-gloss finish over a maple fretboard with an edge binding to hide the fret tangs reminds me of a vintage Shergold, but without the zero fret. The feel is bright, twangy and very fast and the 25.5" scale length gives the Steer a Fenderesque tension. However, with only 20 frets, top-end widdlers may not be best pleased. The headstock design tops off the guitar's maverick look, but it totally fits in the Burns catalogue where obscure shapes have always been the preference. Note ➔

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DESCRIPTION **Semi-hollow electric guitar. Made in China, final assembly in UK**
PRICE **£649**

BUILD **Maple bolt-on neck with 20-fret bound maple fingerboard, basswood body (routed out both sides of the pickup cavity), six-saddle Burns bridge, unbranded tuners**
ELECTRICS **Burns humbucker in bridge position and Tri-Sonic single coil at the neck, master volume and independent tone controls, three-way selector and mini toggle for bridge pickup coil tap**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **White, greenburst (with central metal scratchplate for that authentic 1980s look)**

SCALE LENGTH
647mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43.2mm
12th fret 53.2mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 22.2mm
12th fret 23mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35.3mm
Bridge 55.5mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.6mm
12th fret bass 2mm
WEIGHT **3.54kg/7.8lbs**

CONTACT **Burns London**
+ 44 (0) 208 7833 638
www.burnsguitars.com

Like this? Try this...

Reverend
Double Agent
Offset rocker with humbucker/P90 pickup layout. Bolt-on maple neck, tunomatic bridge with stop tail. No bridge pickup coil tap, but rather a bass roll-off switch designed to make the humbucker sound like a single coil
RRP **£611.99**

Fender
Classic Series '72 Telecaster Thinline
While there's nothing exactly comparable in the Fender catalogue to the Steer, with a coil tap mod this would be tantalisingly close. Bolt on maple neck, chambered body and humbuckers
RRP **£948**

Fret-King
CS Semitone Deluxe
Thinline T-style guitar with bolt-on maple neck and maple fingerboard. Bridge position humbucker plus two single coil pickups. Loads of different voices
RRP **£1889**

Split humbucker at the bridge and a high-power single coil at the neck

the four string trees, which are designed to increase tension over the nut. Add the separated, three-piece tortoiseshell scratchplate and the chunky amp-style control knobs and there is no doubt of the Steer's Burns heritage.

The bridge humbucker and the neck single coil are both mounted directly into the scratchplate and hang in the cavity below. There is a two-way mini toggle that acts as a coil tap for the bridge pickup. The neck unit is a vintage-style Tri-Sonic, another unique Burns design, featuring a loose-wound coil of wire and a pair of ceramic magnets. They are highly valued for their rich harmonic character and have always been Brian May's weapon of choice for creating killer rock lead voices, but they can also be angular and cutting when used in the context of choppy rhythm playing.

Sounds

One thing that becomes clear is that the Steer seems best when approached as an instrument with single-coil pickups. Then, flicking the bridge pickup to humbucking mode works like a booster for solos and lead playing. This is an extremely effective way of creating over-the-top sounds for those moments when you really want to rock out. While the humbucker works effectively for clean voices and combines well with the Tri-Sonic for a range of chord voices, the edgier brightness of the coil-tapped sound has more clean presence, creating snappy country and blues riffs and plenty of jangle for classic pop. As a tool for overdriven sounds the coil tap is very it's very Strattish: even, chiming and bright, so it will cut through the muddiest live mix.

Switching to humbucker mode brings on some rich crunch for power chords, and classic hard rock riffs feel right at home. Switching between the bridge pickup in humbucker mode and the Tri-Sonic is more difficult as there is a noticeable difference in output, so if you start with the humbucker sound it's hard to go anywhere other than to quieter parts without resorting to a boost pedal or an overdrive.

On its own, the neck Tri-Sonic is brilliant for clean chord strumming behind vocals and there's an underlying warmth that's very pleasing. Push the amp a little harder and the break-up tone has an angry, forward bite that's positively exciting. Pushing the gain hard brings on a classic '70' style singing lead tone with excellent sustain. Pulling things back a little but keeping the volume quite high creates an almost Gretsch-like vibe.

Verdict

If you pinned me down and demanded a comparison between the Burns Steer and another instrument, the closest one I could give would be a maple neck Fender Telecaster Deluxe with a coil tap mod. However, the Steer is far more than this. While the looks won't appeal to everyone, it's an immensely fun instrument to play and the range of different sounds that can be created is quite awesome. The neck is a real peach to play and again, offers something a little different. One of the nice things about contemporary Burns guitars is that they come with a lot of extras – so you get a really solid fitted case (in silver snakeskin tolex, no less), a strap, cleaning cloth, manual and tools...all indicative of an overall commitment to value and detail. In an era where all too many more expensive guitars simply arrive in cardboard boxes, it's an attitude some other manufacturers might do well to adopt.

Crazy horned headstock requires four string trees

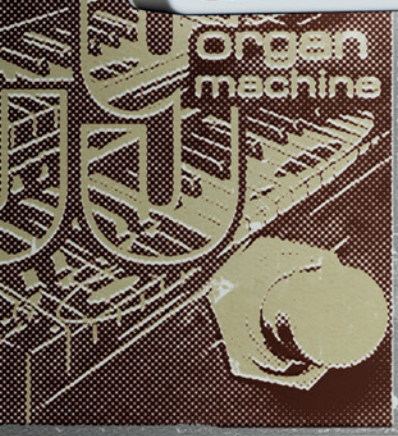
Master volume, two tones, three-way selector and a coil tap

FINAL SCORE

BURNS CLUB SERIES STEER CUTAWAY	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
looks	**17**/20
TOTAL	**89%**

C9 ORGAN MACHINE

The latest organ machine springboards off the game changing B9 to mine another rich vein of classic gold and deliver 9 new, definitive sounds, featuring a collection of some of the coolest electric organ and vintage electronic keyboard sounds ever. Like the B9, it delivers precise control over percussive click, modulation, attack/sustain, drawbar setting and high frequency content. Transform your instrument or use together with the B9 for dual keyboard possibilities!



With its gain stage and signal path optimized for bassists and guitarists who want more low-end definition, this pedal's clean boost and natural overdrive will really enhance your sound. Adjustable clean blend for maximum versatility plus boosted power rails for more headroom and definition. Active pickups? No problem with the switchable -10dB pad. Selectable true or buffered bypass, too!

BASS SOUL FOOD

TRANSPARENT OVERDRIVE

OCTAVIX

Building on the legendary Octavia® vibe of the late 1960s, an incendiary octave up and fuzz that goes from understated to unrestrained transport you to a world of bell bottoms and purple haze.

Volume, Boost and Octave controls let you dial in the right vintage tone. Switchable 24/9volt power rails bring on a tight or saggy sound. True bypass, too!

'Scuse me while I kiss the sky.

SUPER PULSAR

stereo tap tremolo

A truly super tremolo with powerful controls and signal routing. Sculpt the tremolo's shape with adjustable sine, triangle and pulse waveforms while tap tempo and tap divide ensure synchronicity. Control your tempo with the Rate knob, Tap footswitch or through an external source. The envelope filter section gives you dynamic controlover both depth and ratewhich can increase or decrease with your input signal. Access factory rhythms or create your own rhythmic tremolos using the on-board sequencer while the LED array displays the pattern. Save and recall up to eight customized presets. Conjure moving tremolos on-the-fly with expression control over Rate, Depth, Shape, Phase and Volume. Stereo input/output lets you choose any combination of stereo/mono operation. Analog circuitry yields warm, lush tone that will envelop you in shape shifting waves.

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Entwistle

REVELATION
TTX-64

The Revelation TTX-64 is a straightforward and extremely well-priced guitar that offers an interesting humbucking twist on a classic theme. What more could you ask for? Review by **Marcus Leadley**

Revelation may be an unfamiliar brand name for many players, but the back-room presence of designer Alan Entwistle always bodes well. True to past form, his latest designs offer a blend of familiar features and finger-clicking good ideas: just why did no one think of that before?

While TTX-64's body shape brings to mind a Maton guitar, essentially this instrument riffs on the Tele concept: bolt-on maple neck with a rosewood fingerboard, ashtray bridge with through-body stringing, a control layout featuring a master tone, volume control and a three-way pickup selector. However, when it comes to pickups, the TTX-64 sets off in a very different and interesting direction, for rather than offering the familiar cocktail of single-coil sounds, it has a hotrails-style humbucker situated at the bridge and a mini-humbucker at the neck.

With its narrow-coil design the bridge pickup is voiced to offer the bright, top-end clarity associated with a single coil but with the enhanced output and noise-cancelling characteristics of a humbucker. Mini humbuckers have quite a complex history; often associated with jazz guitars, they also featured on a number of Gibson Les Paul and Epiphone models. Broadly speaking they have a cleaner and brighter tone than a PAF, but with a fuller, richer and more neutral voice.

Bound, bolt-on maple neck and bound alder body

Stylish headstock and Kluson-type machineheads

Instead of the usual cocktail of single-coils the TTX-64 has a hotrails bridge pickup plus a mini-humbucker

Out of the box the TTX-64 feels like a solid, practical guitar. It balances well on the strap, but it's a little awkward on the knee when sitting; the lower body cutaway is positioned quite far forward and the instrument is a little tail-heavy as a result. The slab-style alder body, without ribcage chamfer or droptop curve, has a vintage angularity that is familiar, charming and slightly uncomfortable, all at the same time. The neck is made from a surprisingly nice-looking piece of maple and appears to have been cut from a single piece of timber, as there are no apparent joints. Finished in a slick gloss finish, its slim profile feels quite '70s to the touch. The fretboard wood looks to be of an equally high standard, but there is some scalloping around frets 17-19, which suggests some slightly rough or inexperienced finishing. The fret job is nice and even, though, and the presence of an edge binding and block markers adds a further touch of class. The tuners are Kluson-style repros.

FACTFILE
REVELATION TTX-64

DESCRIPTION **Solidbody guitar. Made in China**
PRICE **£199.99**

BUILD **Alder body, bolt-on maple neck with 22-fret rosewood fingerboard. Ashtray bridge with string-through anchoring. Kluson-style tuners**
ELECTRICS **Entwistle TLXH hotrails blade humbucker (bridge) and mini humbucker (neck), three-way selector, master tone and volume control**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Three-tone sunburst**

SCALE LENGTH
647mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 41.3mm
12th fret 51.3mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 20mm
12th fret 21mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 33.8mm
Bridge 54mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.6mm
12th fret bass 1.8mm
WEIGHT **3.5kg/7.75lbs**

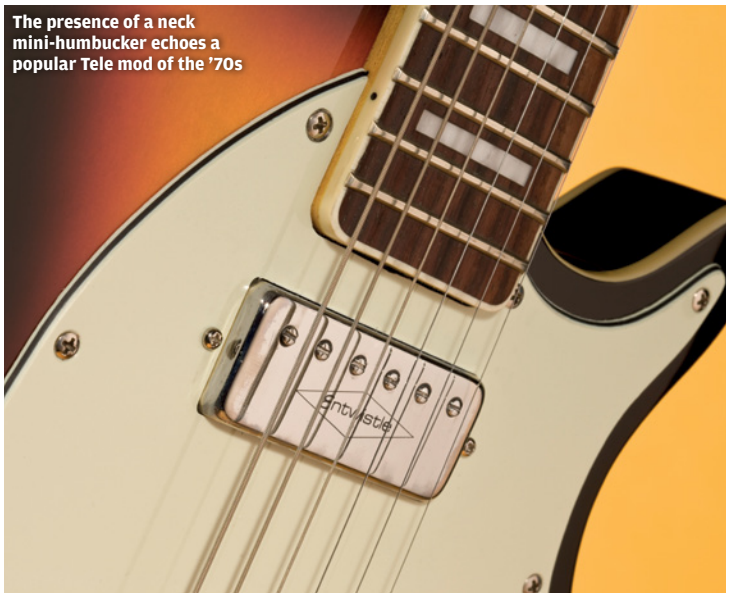
CONTACT **Sutherland Trading**
02920 887333
revelationguitars.co.uk

Like this? Try this...

G&L
Tribute ASAT II Deluxe
Well-built affordable ASAT with a pair of humbuckers, a maple neck and a rosewood fingerboard
RRP **£410**

Fender
Standard Telecaster HH
A Fender Telecaster with a pair of humbuckers, a maple neck and a rosewood fingerboard; coil tap for single coil sounds, too
RRP **£446**

Fret-King
Country Squire Semitone
Classic twangy stuff with a pair of humbuckers and a thinline body to ease weight and put a bit of extra air in your sound
RRP **£559**



The presence of a neck mini-humbucker echoes a popular Tele mod of the '70s

The Revelation is solidly constructed and vibrates well, so there's plenty of sustain and a sense of wood in the clean sound

Sounds

The Entwistle TLHX Hotrail is a very nice pickup with a distinctive sound all its own. Unlike some standard humbuckers the sound is much more focussed in the upper mids, and there's plenty of top end clarity too. It's a pickup that can easily handle clean melodic playing, and the simple chords sound promisingly full and well-articulated. On its own, the bridge pickup has an unusually potent twanginess, so country-style riffs sound fantastic. The guitar is very solidly constructed and vibrates well, so there is plenty of natural sustain and a real sense of wood in the clean sound.

Switching to the neck pickup offers a remarkable shift of character. Here, it's the lower mids that seem to get the gloss, and as a result the overall fullness and warmth of the pickup's voice is what stands out. It's a big, jazzy, almost Gretsch-like sound – quite an eye-opener, and not at all what one might anticipate from a guitar like this.

As both pickups have quite strongly individual characteristics, the fact that the combination is equally distinct will come as no surprise. The result is not so much a smooth blend (the sort of sound you get when pickups of similar specification get mixed), it's more of a merge where the individual characteristics are still clearly apparent. Hence we have a warm but perhaps slightly indistinct jazzy bass character with lively mids and a bright top end that isn't piercing. It would be a very original tone for a guitar at any price, so the fact that a low-cost model can deliver a distinct signature sound like this is very good news for any player on a budget who doesn't want to follow the usual style trends.

The individual pickups and the twin pickup sound work equally well with overdrive, but under these conditions the sounds become a little less nuanced and slightly more conventional. This isn't a criticism; most people will want certain sorts of performance characteristics, and the TTX-64 really delivers. At medium drive levels the bridge pickup delivers punky, choppy chords with plenty of clout and a great sense of definition, and you can wind the gain a little further for killer rock solo voices that really wail, or else back off the guitar's volume control for well-defined electric blues. The tone control works very evenly throughout its entire range, adding another very useful level of manipulation.

Used in anger, the neck pickup has more of a Gibson-like brogue, and classic heavy rock riffs sound just dandy. Overdrive evens out the twin pickup voice, creating a wide-spectrum sound that fills the soundstage beautifully, giving an impression of largeness and an airiness that's truly impressive... especially for the price.

Verdict

Alan Entwistle is seemingly a man on a mission: to deliver excellent guitars that offer something a bit different, all at a price that makes people smile. The amount of time he spends supervising production at the factory in China seems to be paying off; each Revelation we see seems to push the envelope just that little bit harder. The TTX-64 is heaps of fun to play, and sounds great. While a kind of cross between an obscure guitar shape and the workings of one of the most time-honoured designs, the innovative choice of pickups means this is anything but a clone. It's a solid performer that can cope with any style of music that doesn't require a whammy bar. This is an instrument a beginner won't outgrow in a hurry, while more experienced players will love the easy-playing vibe – and the price is less than that of many boutique pedals.

Ashtray bridge with non-compensated slotted saddles

Three-way selector with volume and tone controls

FINAL SCORE

REVELATION TTX-64	
Build Quality	**17**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**19**/20
Looks	**17**/20
TOTAL	**89%**

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CARR

CARR
Skylark

With evocative styling, a lush spring reverb, a mighty clever power attenuator and the ability to swerve from righteous tweediness to chiming sparkle, the Skylark may be Carr's best yet. Review by **Huw Price**

FACTFILE
CARR SKYLARK

DESCRIPTION **Single channel 12W point-to-point wired valve combo with 12" Celestion A-type ceramic speaker, built in attenuator (1.2W to 0W) and spring reverb. Made in the USA**
PRICE **£1949**

VALVES **2 x 6V6GT, 2 x 12AX7, 2 x 12AT7**

CONTROLS **Volume, high gain switch, Treble, Middle, Bass, Reverb, Presence and Attenuator with bypass switch**

DIMENSIONS **21" wide, 9" deep, 15.5" high**
WEIGHT **17.5kg/38.5lbs**

CONTACT **Coda Music**
01438 350815
www.carramps.com

The dual 6V6 Fender Harvard of the 1950s provided the inspiration for the new Carr Skylark. This model may be less familiar to readers than the Champ and 5E3 Deluxe that flanked the Harvard in Fender's late-'50s catalogue, but you will have heard Steve Cropper playing one on all those classic Stax recordings.

In fact Carr could easily have kept quiet about the Fender Harvard inspiration because the Skylark has so many extras that it surely qualifies as an original design. Interestingly, the company has chosen to combine fixed and cathode biasing to balance the thickness and dimension of the former with the firmness, clarity and punch of the latter. A single input with a Hi/Lo gain switch is followed by a full complement of EQ controls that include Treble, Middle and Bass. Whether you consider Presence as equalisation or feedback adjustment is up to you, but the Skylark has one of those too.

Then there's the onboard spring reverb with all-valve circuitry and a proper 17" spring tank, plus a built-in switchable attenuator that goes from 1.2W to 0W. Dropping down that far may seem drastic, but it will make perfect sense to anybody who has ever bought a 4W Fender Champ in the mistaken belief that they will get low-volume overdrive. In reality 4W is pretty loud, but 1.2W is just loud enough to be fun without annoying your neighbours.

This vinyl is known as 'fawn slub', but there are a dozen others to choose from

Carr could have kept quiet about the Fender Harvard inspiration because it surely qualifies as an original design

Other features include a bespoke saddle-leather handle that looks seriously over-built. Carr has also chosen to eschew the Harvard-spec 10" speaker (plus Carr's usual Eminence) for a 12" Celestion A-type. The A-type is Celestion's spin on classic US guitar speakers with a ceramic magnet and a respectable 98dB efficiency rating.

Sounds

From the outset it's obvious that the Skylark spans the tonal time zones ➔

Like this? Try this...

Lazy J
J20
Based on the 5E3 tweed Deluxe, the J20 comes with optional reverb and tremolo modules, defeatable power scaling and tweed/blackface voltage switching. Users can use 6V6s instead of the standard 6L6s; speaker options include Tayden Alnico and Celestion Blue
RRP **£1738**

Gartone
Regal 15
For those whose tastes are more British than American this twin-channel 15/7.5W EL84-loaded combo has Mercury Magnetics transformers, turret board construction, a birch ply cabinet and extension speaker jack. With the two channels voiced for plexi and Voxy tones, the Regal 15 is handwired in the UK
RRP **£1650**

Tone King
Falcon
The Tone King Falcon is a dual 6V6-driven 12W combo with a single 10" ceramic Eminence speaker and a built-in attenuator with six levels. The single channel has a three-voice preamp that can deliver everything from bright, clear cleans to big, fat, chunky overdrive
RRP **£1349**

The Skylark features custom-made transformers and real point-to-point wiring

The US-flavoured Celestion A Type promises laidback mids and full lows

The Skylark is no mere tweed replica – it can do everything from pure country to Stax soul to sweet and bluesy

with ease, and Carr has achieved this by tweaking the controls to provide Skylark owners with the tools to swing the sound towards raw '50s tweed or cleaner '60s blackface as mood or circumstances dictate. The Bass and Treble controls seem to have more range than usual, but Middle is the real star because it goes from serious scoop to a substantial boost with an accompanying increase in gain. Presence can be used to add top end, but it works by adjusting negative feedback. When you turn up Presence you are actually reducing the negative feedback, which results in extra high-frequency sheen and overdrive.

So how does all this work in practice? For a tweedy tone you should crank up the Middle and Presence controls – and don't be shy about using the maximum settings. At this point the Skylark may sound a bit too bright, so consider the Treble control as a kind of a high-frequency roll-off. You may find that you'll end up with it almost completely flat, then you can simply dial in the Bass to taste along with the Volume.

The Skylark delivers thick, juicy overdrive, joyous harmonic overtones and ample sustain for soloing. The bottom end may be slightly loose and spongy, but the chewy valve grind combined with the sparkling trebles will make you feel like a youthful Billy Gibbons on a good day.

The problem with tweed replicas is that they tend to just do one thing really well. With the Skylark you can roll the Middle and Presence back, set the Bass and Treble anywhere around halfway, dial in a bit of reverb, and you'll have clean tones to die for. It can be pure country, Stax soul or sweet and bluesy; you can still get overdrive with these settings, especially in High Input mode, but it's a glassier, chimier affair without the midrange bark and grind.

So that's how you move from '50s to '60s, but you can also get to all points in between. After a while you'll discover how you can tighten tweedy lows by reducing Presence and compensating with a touch more Treble and Volume... or you can fatten and loosen up a blackface tone by doing the contrary.

The Reverb control provides a gradual increase rather than the too little/too much transition that is all too often the case. It's just as well, because this reverb unit really does sound delicious. It's eerily three-dimensional, and can go from just a hint of ambience to dripping off the walls.

Carr's attenuator employs high-quality Solen aerospace capacitors and a real speaker voice coil rather than power scaling or a resistive network. The attenuator control is continuous rather than stepped so as not to adversely affect the Skylark's tone, and it's comfortably the best built-in attenuator we have encountered. The lowest position silences the Skylark and you can easily set it to the point where the amp level is more or less equal to the acoustic sound of a solidbody. We were able to use the attenuator to jam along with backing tracks playing through the speakers of a laptop with no difficulty, and at 1.2W it's loud enough to overpower an acoustic guitar and most singers.

Two 12AX7s and two 12AT7s for the preamp and reverb

A pair of 6V6 valves gives 12W at full whack

Verdict

True, very loud cleans aren't on the menu – this is a 12W amp, so that's hardly surprising – but an extra 3W or so might have been nice, as would an alnico speaker option. Even so, the Skylark is pretty much perfect as a home, studio and small gig amplifier for fans of classic American tone. It's our favourite Carr model so far.

FINAL SCORE

CARR SKYLARK	
Build Quality	**20**/20
Versatility	**19**/20
Sound	**19**/20
Value for money	**16**/20
Vibe	**20**/20
TOTAL	**94%**

Photo: Pat Graham

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FENDER SUPER-SONIC™ AND SUPER BASSMAN® AMPLIFIERS
THE DOME — DECEMBER 20, 2014
BRIGHTON, UK

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BLUGUITAR
AMP1 Guitar Amp

Big watts, weeny dimensions – this amp-meets-pedal puts all the power on the floor. Review by **Richard Purvis**

We owe a lot to those crazy Germans. First, they invented everything from wholemeal bread and tomato ketchup to Playmobil and the motor car; now they want to re-invent the guitar amplifier. Well, one German does anyway. Thomas Blug, rated session player and long-time tech tweaker, has set the internet all a-flutter with this humble-looking stompbox… which, despite fitting in the outside pocket of the average gigbag, is nothing less than a 100W valve head.

Okay, we're pushing it a bit with the 'valve' part. There's one sub-miniature tube in the output stage of what is otherwise a solid-state amplifier, and it's not even clear from the literature how much of the work it's doing… but if this little device sounds as good as the affable Herr Blug claims, we're not going to worry too much about that. After all, what we're promised here is a channel-switching 100W amp with enough connectivity and tone-shaping options to leave most full-size heads whimpering with envy.

It's a simple enough unit to get going with. There's a guitar input at one end and 8/16 Ohm speaker outputs at the other, with an FX loop and an extra output for direct recording or headphones in between. Three footswitches control channel-hopping, gain boost and reverb, while a rotary dial lets you choose which overdrive channel to hop to: Vintage, Classic or Modern. There's also a three-way EQ section, plus a line of trimpots on the side for further overdrive control, and even a tiny rocker switch to select a hard or soft noisegate (or bypass).

The AMP1 is weighty enough for its size but you wouldn't call it a reassuringly solid chunk of engineering. The plastic footswitches don't look great, the trimpots are hyper-fiddly, and the channel names are impossible to read when lit up. Let's hope it sounds more grown-up than it feels.

In use

Amp heads belong on top of cabs… but this thing has footswitches, not elbow-switches, so down to the floor it goes – and out comes an extra-long speaker cable to take the signal back up again. Starting on the Clean channel with everything roughly halfway, the tone is big, bright, full and – without a doubt – giggably loud. If it wants to be a blackface Fender, it's not missing by much. The EQ controls are very responsive, and engaging the boost brings up the crunch a couple of notches earlier on the Volume dial. There isn't a lot of crunch, mind – for that we need to switch to Vintage, which has bags of Marshall-style bluesy drive. Classic raises the rocking stakes further, while Modern does the high-gain metal thing with some style, especially if you turn the Middle control right down.

The boost works brilliantly on every channel, and all of these sounds score highly for clarity, even with a touch of the spring-style digital reverb added. The only real minus point, at least with our sample, was an unnatural jerkiness in the channel-switching that would rule out seamless mid-song changes.

Verdict

The AMP1 sounds miraculously good for such a teeny unit, and it is reasonably priced for what it offers. Hardcore tonehounds might not be rushing to trade in their vintage and boutique treasures just yet, but this is a new benchmark in tone-per-kilogram.

FINAL SCORE

BLUGUITAR AMP1	
Build Quality	**16**/20
Versatility	**20**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**17**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**88%**

FACTFILE
BluGuitar AMP1

DESCRIPTION **100W four-channel stompbox amplifier. Made in China**
RRP **£589**

TOP PANEL **Vintage/Classic/Modern switch for Overdrive channel; Clean channel volume, Overdrive channel Gain and Master volume; Bass, Middle, Treble, Reverb level, Master volume; Footswitches for Channel, Boost and Reverb**

REAR PANEL **100-240v mains input, power switch; Remote1 footswitch input; 16 and 8 Ohm speaker outputs; Recording/headphones output; FX loop Send and Return; Guitar input**

SIDE PANEL **Boost level, Modern volume and tone, Classic volume and tone, Clean tone; FX loop parallel/serial switch, Metal/Soft/Off switch for noisegate**

DIMENSIONS **24.5cm wide, 19.2cm deep, 6.8cm high**
WEIGHT **1.2kg/2.6lbs**
ACCESSORIES **Soft case included, Remote1 foot controller £269**

CONTACT **JHS**
0113 286 5381
www.jhs.co.uk
www.bluguitar.com

Like this? Try this…

Electro-Harmonix
44 Magnum
A very simple solid-state head in a compact pedal enclosure… it sounds a bit flat, though
RRP **£100 approx**

Cornell
PedalAmp
This four-watt all-valve mini-head also serves as an overdrive pedal and recording preamp
RRP **£690**

Line 6
Pod HD500X
The emulation specialists' latest multi-FX stomper includes a shedful of amp tones for DI recording
RRP **£429**

DIGITECH
Mosaic & Polara Pedals

Why lug that 12-string to the gig for one song? Looking for the ultimate reverb collection? A couple of new pedals from the smart folks at DigiTech might have the answers. Review by **Marcus Leadley**

Stomplock protects the knobs against unwanted changes

Here are two new DigiTech pedals that take us into a zone of shifting time and space. We have the unusual Mosaic, a polyphonic 12-string effect pedal, and the Polara, the latest contender in the world of do-anything-and-more multi-setting reverb pedals.

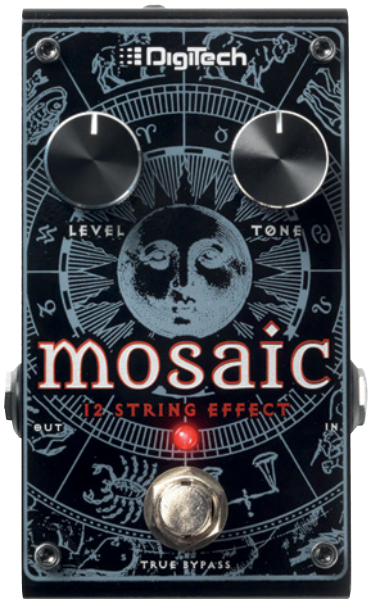
Mosaic

DigiTech's 12-string effect pedal looks very cool and refreshingly un-generic. The custom enclosure is a good size without representing a problem for your pedalboard, and the zodiac black/grey graphic is arty enough without getting in the way of the unit's function: you can still read the control legends, and the marker points on the knobs stand out clearly. There are only two controls, Level and Tone, but they're interactive, so there's a whole array of sounds and subtleties waiting to be created.

However, this is very much a single-function unit, so you'll need to want the 'thing' it does – and that thing is primarily to make your six-string guitar sound like a 12-string. So either you're going to be a player who uses a 12-string at least some of the time, or someone who wants incorporate a 12-string-like sound into their live or recorded toolkit without going all the way and getting an additional instrument – and at around £100, it's certainly a cheaper option than a new guitar. The unit is true bypass, so the intent is to make sure your basic, uncoloured sound stays pristine, and DigiTech is promising precision tracking and artefact-free sonic loveliness.

Sounds

As the Mosaic is basically an application of pitch-shifting technology it soon becomes clear that the more you play your guitar like a 12-string, the more it sounds like a 12-string. Picked and strummed chords and single-string melodies (especially those executed on the higher strings) sound very good. The



pedal works equally well with electric or electro-acoustics. It's a much more believable 12-string simulation than you can create with a chorus pedal or an older-generation pitchshifter, but as soon as you start to bend strings the illusion is lost. That's not to say that the sound becomes dysfunctional – far from it; there are some great lead sounds to be had and overdriven blues and bottleneck are loads of fun, but sticking to a 12-string style performance for 12-string like sounds is the house rule, basically. If you're using single coils, the unit seems to perform best with the tone control set to the bassier end of the spectrum, while humbuckers benefit from a brighter, more toppy setting. In both cases less is generally more in terms of Level. Used as a subtle shade, with the effected signal set at a level just below the dry signal, the effect is relatively transparent, adding a rich sonic layer. Pushing the Level control a little harder brings on a more classically '60s tone which is a little more phasey, but still believable. For our taste, the effect becomes a little too obvious and pronounced when you move into the last third of either control's travel.

Polara

We've been somewhat inundated with quality reverb pedals in the last couple of years. Modern reverb pedals tend to offer multiple options, with algorithms designed to deliver vintage tones, room ambiences and improbable but creative spatial extensions. This Polara is a great example. It offers seven settings: Room, Plate, Reverse, Modulated, Halo and Hall, while three further knobs control Level, Liveliness and Decay. The mini-toggle is labelled Tails: when on, the reverb tail decays naturally when the effect is switched to bypass, while when set to the off position, the reverb decay will end abruptly. The unit can be used in both mono or stereo, and one of the big selling-points is that it comes loaded with genuine Lexicon reverb algorithms. Finally, while the Mosaic ships with the required power supply as part of the deal, the Polara doesn't. That's a shame.

Sounds

For the money, this is an very useful tool. The reverbs sound excellent and there is enough control to enable you to 'tune' the reverb to your performance or the role it plays in an overall mix. The unit also ships with the clever little rubber Stomplock which secures your finely-tuned settings against clumsy handling or a stray boot.

The Spring setting recreates the 'drip' of surfy, amp-reverb sounds. Plate delivers the classy but unnatural sheen of ''60s/'70 production. Room and Hall are useful settings that will create believable live spaces around your tone or help bring software simulations to life, and Modulation and Halo fill your ears with swilling, chorussy vibes. If you're looking for spaced-out ambiences, here's where you get positively ethereal. Reverse mode is bonkers – and loads of fun. The dry signal is eliminated, so it's off to a psychedelic realm you go.

Verdict

The Mosaic is a one-trick pony, but what it does, it does very well. The controls work smoothly so you can mix the effect nicely with the dry signal. The big 'but' is that it's only a single-use pedal, and it's hard to see why it couldn't be one setting on a more multi-purpose unit. And the Polara reverb? On the downside, we like the graphics but reading the pedal or knob settings in low light is difficult. Still, this is a very useful bit of kit; stereo operation adds a dimension of flexibility, it has loads of applications, and it would be a real upgrade in terms of both features and sounds for someone with an older-generation reverb pedal.

FINAL SCORE

MOSAIC 12-STRING EFFECT	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**17**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**87%**

FINAL SCORE

POLARA REVERB	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**89%**

FACTFILE

DigiTech Mosaic 12-string Effect

DESCRIPTION **12-string guitar simulator pedal. Aluminium enclosure, true bypass switching. Made in China. 9V adapter supplied**
RRP **£109**

CONTROLS **Level, Tone**

FEATURES **Compartment for six rechargeable AA batteries; 6.5V PSU input; extension speaker output**

DigiTech Polara Reverberation

DESCRIPTION **Multifunction digital reverb with seven settings. Aluminium enclosure, true bypass switching. Built in China. 9V power adapter required but not supplied**
RRP **£109**

CONTROLS **Level, Decay, Liveliness and mode selector (Room, Plate, Reverse Modulated, Halo, Hal and Spring)**

CONTACT **Sound Technology 01462 480000 www.digitech.com**

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Electro-Harmonix
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Flexible pedal offering octave-up and octave-down for a 12-string simulation
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Corona Chorus
Depending on the type of '12-string sound' you want, a quality chorus pedal may do the trick. This has mono and stereo in/out
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TC Electronic
Hall Of Fame
Springs, plates, halls, rooms and a whole lot more. Stereo input/output
RRP **£105**

Boss
RV-5
Solid digital reverb with eight reverb modes and stereo in/outs
RRP **£109**

Lexicon
MX200
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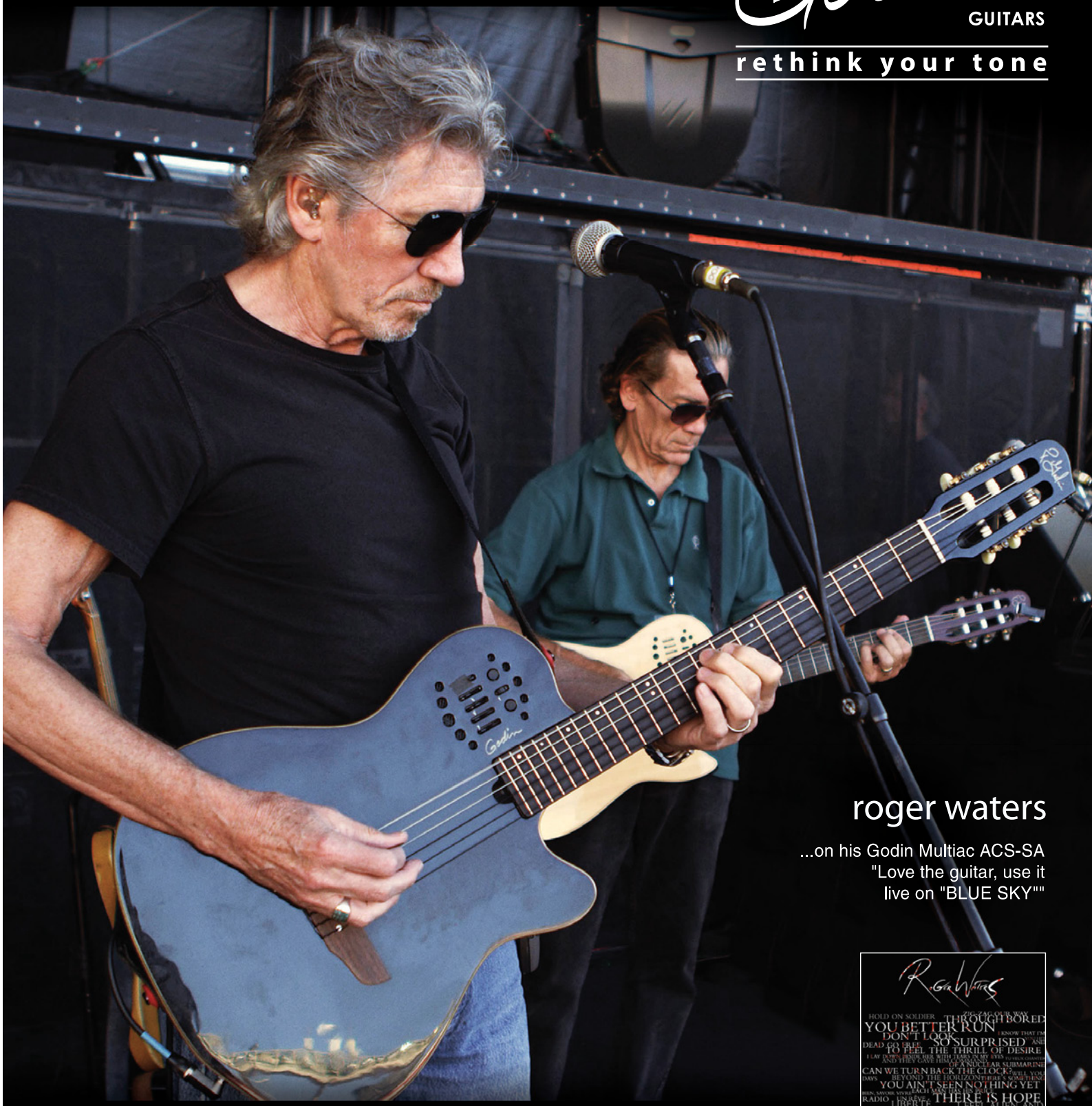

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PIGTRONIX
Infinity Looper

Loopers have been around for a good while, but this new Pigtronix Infinity feels like it takes things to a whole new level. Review by **Marcus Leadley**

The Infinity looper is a deceptively simple-looking bit of kit; it actually comes with a 52-page manual. Dedicated loopers have been with us since the early 2000s, but the Infinity feels like a new-generation machine. It's got 48kHz/24-bit sound quality and delivers two independent loops with serial or parallel modes, so you can get adventurous with advanced layering. It can be a mono or stereo input/output device, or you can configure it to take different sources (say, a guitar and a bass), record them to different loops, and output them separately. You can undo and redo overdubs, and record dual-loop content to 50 preset locations. An internal 8GB micro SD card delivers around two hours of recording; the card's not designed to be interchangeable, but audio can be moved via USB to a Mac or PC using the pre-installed Infinity Looper Application, which also allows you to update the unit's firmware.

The Infinity's controls are clearly labelled and it looks a lot more 'serious' than most Pigtronix units. Many of the knobs and switches are multi-function, so you'll need that hefty manual, but it only took us about 10 minutes to get the hang of the basics. The use of physical knobs for Master Volume and Loop level is sensible as it lets you set up the balance intuitively. The unit fires up with Loop 1 armed, so you're ready to record and layer sound instantly. Recording will start if you press the Loop 1 switch; press it again to start playback, then press it again during playback to start overdubbing. The Loop 2 switch works in the same way, but you need to arm this manually, which means pressing it twice to start recording. There is a kind of choreography to learn and it takes a while to become fluid, but you're helped by red, green and orange LEDs for the different play, record and overdub modes. Once you have a recording, simply select a preset number, press and hold until the display flashes, and hey presto – that's your first new loop/track/riff recorded.

In Use

The most important thing is that the Infinity sounds great, with no appreciable difference between your live sound and the recording. Once you've got the basics sorted, it's time to experiment. The Sync-Multi feature is very useful; it lets you link loops 1 and 2 together, but without limiting the performance to the length of the initial loop. The second loop can be created in multiples between 1 – 6 times. Loop Aging is a cool feature that allows you to set up the pedal to allow loops to gradually fade out as new ideas come forward. This can be controlled via an expression pedal, so looping isn't tied to an essentially repetitive, cyclic mode of operation. Unlike some loopers there's no tempo guide (though the display does blink to indicate the beginning of the loop) nor click to play, but this isn't really necessary as the unit has a MIDI input so it can be controlled by, and run against, an external sequencer, so you can clock it in time with a track or a beat source if necessary. Indeed, many of the Infinity's functions can be controlled by MIDI. To make full use of the features you need the £60 Dual Remote, which puts the undo/redo function and reverse loop mode at your feet.

Verdict

A good looper can turn you into a very effective solo artist/improviser, and the Infinity's MIDI sync capability means instant live integration for any group using a computer/sequencer. The low latency, high-fidelity nature of the unit means it can also become part of a very effective home recording system – and releasing guitar multi-tracking from the computer environment can feel extremely liberating. The Infinity isn't cheap but it sounds great, offers an extensive range of features, and is a very flexible and musical tool.

FINAL SCORE

PIGTRONIX INFINITY LOOPER	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**90%**

FACTFILE
Pigtronix Infinity Looper

DESCRIPTION **Stereo looping pedal with dual loop capability, saving to 50 preset locations. 24bit/48kHz sound quality. Approx 2 hours recording time. USB connectivity for interfacing with Mac or PC. Manufactured in USA. 18V power adapter supplied**
RRP **£449; Dual Momentary Remote unit, £59.99**

CONTROLS
Master Volume, Preset Save/Select, Loop Volume, Stop Mode, Input Select, Series Loops, Sync Multi
CONNECTIVITY **Inputs 1 and 2, Output 1 and 2, MIDI in, Aux Out, Undo (for momentary remote connection), Expression Pedal. Three stomp switches: Stop (Hold/Erase), Loop 1 (Rec/Overdub) and Loop 2 (Rec/Overdub)**
DIMENSIONS
38mm high, 116mm deep, 190mm wide

CONTACT **JHS**
01132 865 381
www.pigtronix.com

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Electro-Harmonix
45000 Looper
Fully-featured looper capable of recording four tracks which can be panned or mixed down for further layering. 44.1kHz/16-bit sound quality, DI out
RRP **£420**

Boss
RC300 Loop Station
Floorboard-style unit offering synchronised three -loop playback and a multitude of onboard FX. 3 hours recording time to internal memory, 44.1kHz/16-bit sound
RRP **£415**

Boomerang
III Phrase Sampler
Three-loop capability for sequence or layered production; can record at both 48kHz/24-bit and 24kHz/20-bit. Many advanced features and connectivity for additional footpedals
RRP **£408**

SEAGULL
Natural SG & S6 Concert Hall

Seagull are producing a new cedar-topped OM in the Original Series, while their fresh Excursion range has a new bracing design – which gave a result that made us jump. Review by **Huw Price**

Established in Quebec in 1982, Seagull guitars have always stood out from the pack thanks to their use of sustainable North American timbers – and with those distinctive slimline headstocks, you won't mistake them for any other brand. This month, we're looking at two: one from the low/mid priced Excursion Series, and a new model in the Original Series.

Natural SG

Seagull's new Excursion Series is intended to provide 'affordable, quality crafted North American-made acoustic guitars'. These guitars are supposedly 'rugged, bare bones and packed full of tone', so we're here to find out if the Natural SG delivers on the promise.

In case you're wondering, 'SG' refers to the 'semi-gloss' finish. It seems more like matte, really; it's so thin that you can barely tell any finish has been applied, and no stain or tint has been used whatsoever. The top is an impressively straight-grained piece of creamy pale solid spruce with Seagull's bilingual 'burn stamped rosette'. Canadian wild cherry laminate is used for the back and sides and it should be noted that it's three ply. You may be thinking 'so what', considering that the back and sides aren't solid anyhow, but compare any three-ply archtop with a five-ply equivalent and the difference in resonance will be apparent. The back and sides are almost as pale as the top and the silver leaf maple neck continues the visual theme. Seagull use an integrated set neck joint which combines glue and bolts; the bridge and fingerboard are rosewood, and the nut and compensated saddle are both Tusq.

Silver leaf maple neck, scarfed-on headstock and sealed tuners

Plain-looking wild cherry back and sides with no body binding

The Excursion guitars have bracing that isn't tucked into the kerfing, so the top is able to vibrate more like a drum skin

There's no binding to be found on the fingerboard or the body, but it's apparent that Seagull's attention to detail has not been compromised. What's more, in deciding to eschew body binding Seagull realised that not routing into the kerfing provided the top with a wider surface area for gluing. The extra strength this provided ➔

FACTFILE
NATURAL SG

DESCRIPTION
Dreadnought sized acoustic guitar. Made in Canada
PRICE **£299**

BUILD **Solid sitka spruce top, laminated wild cherry back and sides, 21-fret silver leaf maple neck, rosewood fingerboard and bridge, compensated Tusq saddle, Tusq nut, chrome 14:1 diecast tuners**
ELECTRICS **None**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Clear semi-gloss**

SCALE LENGTH
631mm/24.84"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43mm
12th fret 53mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 21mm
12th fret 24mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35.5mm
Bridge 54mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2.5mm
12th fret bass 3mm
WEIGHT **2kg/4.4lbs**

CONTACT **440 Distribution**
01132 589599
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Bilingual soundhole decoration proclaims the guitar's handmade origins

The Natural SG is a big-hearted rhythm instrument but fingerpicking reveals a subtler and more refined side

meant the brace ends did not need to be tucked under the kerfing, so the top is able to vibrate more like a drum skin. The resulting bracing design is unique to the Excursion Series models and doesn't feature on any other Seagull guitar.

The Natural SG is fitted with 14:1 ratio diecast tuners. Our review guitar is acoustic-only, but a Fishman Isys + pickup system is an optional extra, as is a padded gig bag.

Sound

Most of us on this magazine have been reviewing guitars for a long time, but it's heartening that every now and again a guitar is still able to surprise us. There I was, tuning up as usual using the tuner app on my phone; everything went smoothly enough with no sloppiness or nut pings, I formed my usual G major chord… and bam, this Seagull dreadnought almost bounced off my lap. It's bold, it's loud, it's clear, and it's very lively indeed.

Occasionally a guitar can be described as greater than the sum of its parts, and this Seagull would seem to be a case in point. It's always problematic to generalise about genres of guitar, but if you associate dreadnoughts with a deep and strong bass and an extended, chiming treble response, the Natural SG is unlikely to disappoint. However, while some dreadnoughts provide ample bass, they can often succumb to boominess and a lack of definition – a characteristic that can often make them difficult to record. In contrast, the Natural SG generates an impressively solid thump that remains clear and well-focused thanks to a plethora of harmonic overtones.

Semi-gloss finish is there for protection rather than shine

FINAL SCORE

EXCURSION SERIES NATURAL SG	
Build Quality	**19** /20
Playability	**17** /20
Sound	**17** /20
Value for money	**18** /20
Looks	**15** /20
TOTAL	**86%**

We tried some bluegrass-style rhythm work and all the bass notes we picked out punched through the chords with no difficulty. Switching over to fingerpicking, we were still able to get plenty of percussive front end, even when we were palm-muting. But the really impressive thing is that the Natural SG retains a warm woodiness rather than veering too far towards brightness and twanginess.

At the other end of the frequency spectrum the Natural SG pulls off another neat trick. Acoustic guitars that have a chimey and ethereal quality when strummed can sound a bit thin when single notes are played on the unwound strings, but this guitar chimes without ever sounding too bright, but it also produces single notes that are meaty and well-rounded.

There is a gentle midrange scoop to emphasise the classic dreadnought voicing, but it's far from exaggerated. So the D and G strings are set back a little, but not enough to diminish the Natural SG's capabilities as a genuine all-rounder. As much as we enjoyed this guitar as a big-hearted and powerful rhythm instrument, fingerpicking reveals a subtler and more refined side.

S6 Cedar Concert Hall

The Concert Hall is a new addition to Seagull's Original Series. As the name implies this series has been around since the start, but rather than Seagull's own variation on the J-45 body shape, this one is more like an orchestra model in shape and size.

Besides that it's business as usual, with a solid cedar top plus laminated wild cherry back and sides. Once again the neck is silver leaf maple with a stacked heel, but it's been stained reddish brown and features what appears to be a transfer on the front of the headstock, with faux binding.

The rosewood fingerboard is unbound, but the body has chocolate brown binding front and back along with a herringbone rosette. The slim, hand-finished neck profile is not dissimilar to the Natural SG's, but the scale length is increased from 24.84" to 25.5" and the string spacing at the nut is 3mm wider, making it a fingerpicker-friendly 39mm.

Sound

Although the shapes, sizes and soundboards are different, there is an undeniable family resemblance. Again this is a loud guitar with deep and strong bass but, if anything, it's even better defined. Compared with fresh spruce, cedar-topped guitars

↦

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FACTFILE
S6 CEDAR CONCERT HALL

DESCRIPTION
OM-sized acoustic guitar. Made in Canada
PRICE **£429**

BUILD **Solid cedar top, laminated wild cherry back and sides, black binding, 21-fret silver leaf maple neck, rosewood fingerboard and bridge, compensated Tusq saddle, Tusq nut, chrome 14:1 diecast tuners**
ELECTRICS **No**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Clear semi-gloss**

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 45mm
12th fret 54mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 20mm
12th fret 24mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 39mm
Bridge 54mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 2.5mm
WEIGHT **1.9kg/4.18lbs**

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Stanford
Durango G 40 CM
A Grand Auditorium with a solid cedar top, sapele back and sides, mahogany neck, rosewood fretboard, 45mm nut width and satin finish
RRP **£293**

LAG
Tramontane 200 T2ACE
Grand auditorium cutaway with solid cedar top with back, sides and neck, rosewood fretboard, black hardware, rosewood bridge with compensated graphite saddle and a StudioLag Plus pickup system with tuner
RRP **£340**

Simply-bound solid cedar top with herringbone rosette

The S6 is more refined and balanced and has a more forward midrange, so it's perhaps the better all-rounder

are generally supposed to sound more 'played in' and sweeter in the top end when new. This certainly applies to the S6 Concert hall, yet it still has ample treble. Again, very little playing effort is required to get the top vibrating – the S6 Concert Hall feels solidly built, but the body's willingness to resonate demonstrates that it's certainly not over-built. Where the Natural SG produces a breezy and exuberant chime, the S6 Concert Hall has a touch more woody refinement and balance. In large part this is due to a more forward midrange that provides evenness across the strings that many associate with OM-style guitars. Although conceding sheer drive and power to the Natural SG, the S6 is perhaps the better all-rounder of the two.

In rhythm mode it's slightly clearer because there are fewer harmonic overtones to obscure the fundamental frequencies. Consequently little chord inversions and suspensions ring through quite clearly. As a fingerpicking instrument it sounds even better and it's very easy to play. We quickly veered off into DADGAD and beyond, discovering that the S6 Concert Hall holds things together really well even if you drop to open C tunings. The bass doesn't lose any weight and the tone of the low notes takes on almost a piano-like quality. Inspiring stuff.

Verdict

Compared to typical Far Eastern-made acoustics in their price range, Seagulls offer far less decoration and no glossiness whatsoever. Even so, both these guitars are solidly made, and it's obvious that this maker has a clear understanding of how to design and build acoustic guitars. While we can't fault the tone, the looks may not float everybody's boat; the back and sides of the Natural SG could be mistaken for ordinary pale plywood as opposed to the company's own instrument-grade material, and the brown staining on the S6's back and sides hardly gives a high-end impression. It's a shame, because in fact these materials are way better than they appear. Still, when selecting guitars most of us base our decisions on looks as well as tone; fortunately we all have different priorities, and it's quite likely that many players will appreciate the Seagull aesthetic, and you can be assured that when it comes to build quality and tone, there are no compromises.

Laminated wild cherry back and sides

Black-faced headstock with faux binding

FINAL SCORE	
S6 CEDAR CONCERT HALL	
Build Quality	**19**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**15**/20
Looks	**16**/20
TOTAL	**85%**

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MUSIC MAN
Classic Sabre Bass

Pining for the ’80s? Reintroduced in 2013, the Music Man Sabre brings back double humbuckers and even the string mute. Review by **Gareth Morgan**

When bassists think of Music Man, it’s always the original StingRay model that immediately springs to mind: one large humbucker, a beautifully playable neck, an active two-band EQ and string mutes, plus an aggressive rasp with crystalline highs that made it one of the classic basses.

But there’s another ’70s Music Man bass – the Sabre, which appeared in December 1978, roughly a year after Leo Fender cut his ties with the company. It was essentially a two-pickup version of the Stingray, with an added neck humbucker designed to net players who found the StingRay’s sound a little limited. It never really caught on and was discontinued in 1991, but history has regarded the Sabre with favour, and originals have accrued value and are now sought after by collectors and MM enthusiasts.

This reissue, named the Classic Sabre, has a body that’s subtly different to that of a StingRay, about 2.5mm wider, with the faintest touch of the ‘offset’ look and a less pinched, more guitar-like waist. It has forearm and substantial ribcage chamfers – the original Stingray had neither, though of course modern ones do. The Sabre feels comfortable to hold, and while it wants to dive floorwards in the seated position, it sits comfortably on your lap with the help of a restraining forearm.

Our review model’s ‘vintage burst’ finish gives the Sabre proper old-school Music Man credentials and the three-ply black/white/black pickguard (tortie is an option) doesn’t refer to its forebear’s teardrop shape, being almost Jazz Bass-like in design and tracking the lower edge contour into the horn.

Ash body plus a super-stable six-bolt neck plate

Birdseye maple neck with 3+1 tuner layout

The Sabre was discontinued in 1991 but originals are now sought-after by collectors and Music Man enthusiasts

The Sabre comes with a birdseye maple neck with some simply beautiful speckled figuring. It’s a medium ‘C’ contour, not ultra-slim and fast, but the added substance makes it feel comfortable and reassuring, and the lacquered finish doesn’t spoil your left-hand fluidity. The headstock has that instantly familiar shape plus a white, sophisticated-looking melamine nut. The four chrome Schaller BM tuners have open gearing and tapered string posts and are laid out in that well-known three-up, one-down style – something which can catch you out if you like to swap basses, but it’s one of those Music Man things... and it makes it half an inch shorter than a Precision.

You can choose to have a rosewood fingerboard but, for many of us, a proper Music Man really has to have a maple fingerboard with chunky black dot markers, and that’s what you get here. The board is beautifully finished with a lustrous sheen and it carries 21 chunky, high-profile nickel frets.

The Top Loading bridge is a made from hardened chrome-plated steel and has barrel-shaped stainless steel saddles. It’s also got four foam ➔

FACTFILE
Music Man Classic Sabre Bass

DESCRIPTION **Solidbody bass. Made in the USA**
PRICE **£2029**

BUILD **Ash body, bolt-on birdseye maple neck (flame maple an option) with 21 wide, high-profile nickel frets on a maple fingerboard (rosewood an option). Schaller BM tuners and Music Man Top Loading bridge. Chrome hardware**

ELECTRICS **Active with one Standard Neck pickup and one Standard Bridge pickup. Volume, Bass and Treble controls**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Vintage burst, classic natural, classic red, Pacific blue burst, honey burst, black, trans blue**
RANGE OPTIONS **None, but model options include shell pickguard, rosewood fingerboard and flamed maple neck, with appropriate price hikes**

SCALE LENGTH
864mm/34"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43mm
12th fret 57mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 21mm
12th fret 24mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 11mm
Bridge 19mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.5mm
12th fret bass 2mm
WEIGHT
4.46kg/9.9lbs

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Warwick
Streamer/Corvette
Warwick offers both the Streamer and Corvette $$ (Double Buck) models with the double MM pickup configuration
RRP **from £2360**

Fender
Deluxe Dimension IV HH
Fender's double-humbucker Dimension comes with several MM-like attributes including a five-bolt neck plate, active electronics and even a wheel-type truss rod adjuster
RRP **£1449**

string mutes, a traditional MM bridge detail, which can be raised and lowered via knurled thumbscrews. The original idea was to attempt to reproduce a double bass-like quality by adjusting the amount of sustain, and it's another tonal weapon in the Sabre's armoury.

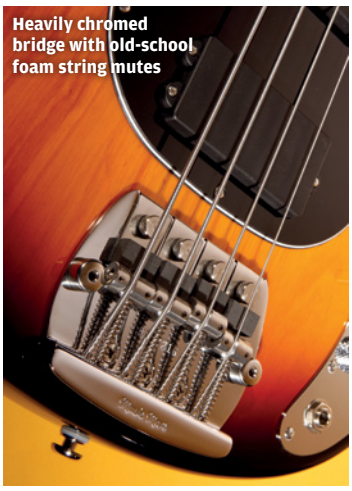
The active electronics are hooked up to one Music Man Standard Neck Pickup, which is a 16-pole humbucker with Alnico magnets, and one Standard Bridge Pickup, similarly packing Alnico magnets but having only eight polepieces. Aside from the two EQ controls, Bass and Treble, the Sabre has a Volume dial and a five-position selector switch: position 1 gives the bridge pickup, centre position 3 gives both and position 5 solos the neck, while position 4 brings in a single (rear) coil version of the neck pickup, and position 2 adds both bridge coils to this. There's also one other feature buried deep in the Sabre's electronics bunker, namely MM's patented Silent Circuit, a dummy coil with a buffer preamp to minimise 60-cycle noise hum in single coil mode.

Sounds

Kicking off with selector in the central position 3, giving both pickups on, we found the best way to approach the Sabre was by cranking the onboard Bass knob – much less than that doesn't really producing enough width for basic practicality – and adding about half Treble boost (the exact degree of boost is difficult to calculate as there's no centre indent and no dial-numbering). Do this and you get a decent E string growl, with a zinginess that becomes more evident as you move across the fretboard, but the response as you move from string to string is still nice and even. The G string has a brittle edge and hints at the StingRay fizz, but it's still plenty wide enough for general usage. Boosting Treble eventually gets thin and wiry, with a sense of compression when popped aggressively.

Volume, a five-way switch and Treble and Bass on a chromed plate

All Music Man basses have a compensated nut


Heavily chromed bridge with old-school foam string mutes

With its switching and two-band EQ the Sabre is armed to deal with styles from earthy blues to bubbling fusion

Move to position 5, and the soloed neck pickup suggests a P-Bass through its woody acousticisms in the lower registers, although the Sabre doesn't have as much of a hollow feel in the midrange. The E string has a snarling edge and it's all brooding and dark-hued on the A and D strings, with highs that inform clarity but lack excessive cut and bite. Boosting Treble increases fret noise a little, adding a crunchy edge to the softer core, and this would definitely make for a decent rock sound, especially for grungier applications.

Switching to the Bridge pickup uncovers a tight, funky tone, not excessively burpy but still reminiscent of Bernard Edwards' StingRay-powered Chic grooves such as *Everybody Dance*. There's a clipped quality to the sound with a tight bass end, gunning mids which hint at gurgly but don't quite make it, and highs that give definition without excessive aggression. These highs get a bit more nasal if you increase Treble; to our ears, while snappy on full boost, they lack the body and impact of a similar setting on many other active basses.

Of the remaining two settings, position 2 is bridge pickup plus the neck pickup's rear coil, which basically gives you a tone similar to the twin-pickup sound but with less warmth and width and a bit more of an edge to the lows. Boosting treble removes more stature and impact, its best application being via the thumb, and this dry, raspy slap tone is perfect for busting some Louis Johnson licks. Position 4 (rear coil, neck pickup only) offers a fractionally gnarlier version of the P-Bass-influenced neck sound, just that little bit lighter in the bottom end and a tad brighter across the neck. In truth, the differences are pretty minimal but still represent a reasonable option.

Verdict

The Sabre isn't just a variation on the much-loved StingRay – it's a really good bass in its own right. Some might raise a quizzical eyebrow at the two-band EQ, but together with the options offered via the five-way switch the Sabre is armed to deal with a wide range of stylistic battles, from earthy blues to bubbling fusion. The footprint of the '70s is deep and obvious in the Sabre's gorgeous lines, playable neck, familiar headstock, and even the sunburst. The price puts it in direct competition some basses of notably higher specs and equal quality... but, hey, none of those say 'Music Man' on the headstock.

FINAL SCORE

MUSIC MAN CLASSIC SABRE 4-STRING	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**15**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**85%**

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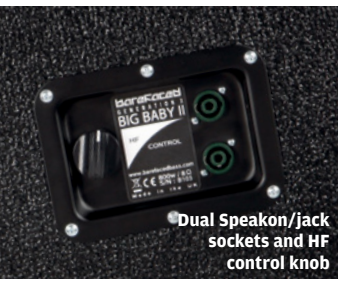
BAREFACED

Big Baby 2

Barefaced bass cabinets were always mighty capable, but the latest generation do an even better job. Review by **Rick Batey**



Dual Speakon/jack sockets and HF control knob

The logo'ed slip cover is made by Roqsolid and costs £35

Black boxes: not very interesting, are they? You know... dark, and square. Cuboid and, erm, noir. But let's bravely forge ahead, for in truth rock'n'roll has been largely built on such items, and this particular black box is rather interesting. Honest.

Barefaced cabinets are built in Brighton, and boss/designer Alex Claber is a whizz when it comes to speakers and speaker enclosures. These days many cabs and combos – even inexpensive ones – boast loudly of 'custom drivers', but the ones Barefaced use really are exclusive to them and very, very highly developed (and expensive), while the cabinets are highly braced and built from high-tech mixed-density plywood, making them extremely light. The smallest Barefaced cabs, the Super Midget and Super Compact, weigh a nutty 23lbs apiece. This Big Baby 2, a two-way 12" woofer-plus-HF driver unit sits roughly in the middle of the range, can handle a whopping 800W, yet it weighs under 30lbs (and the £40 silver cloth grille option would make it 3lbs lighter again), so with just a single handle you can easily lug it a fair distance.

Let's break with tradition by listing some of the reasons you should *not* buy a Barefaced. Firstly, if your idea of a dream bass rig involves purple tolex, custom grille cloths and sexy leather handles, step away; these cabs are all about practicality, with simple metal corners and a textured paint finish that shrugs off chipping (though the Retro Two10 and Six10 do have black vinyl). Secondly, the lightweight construction does mean that the exposed port edge is a little vulnerable; we'd suggest that Barefaced gear is best suited for self-transportation as opposed to being bundled around unflightcased by ape-like stage crew.

Finally, these cabs are direct-order only. A disadvantage? Well, maybe not. It keeps prices down – and also, testing bass gear in a shop rarely gives much idea of how it will cope in real life, so Barefaced's one-month 'buy it, try it, and if it doesn't work out, just send it back' system seems fair and practical.

Barefaced cabs are now on their third generation, with all-new designs, improved handles, more securely-mounted corners and feet and cleaner, more professional metal grilles. The badge stays the same, but the model name is now routed into the inside of

The Big Baby 2 is a very potent design, moving from characterful goodness to monitor-like sound at the twist of a knob

the port slot, which is a cute touch. Around the back, a recessed metal rear panel carries two combined Speakon/jack sockets and a large, friendly cooker-knob style HF control.

But it's the stuff on the inside that counts. The latest 12" driver, the 12XN550, is a frighteningly capable device. *G&B* has in its stash a Gen 2 Barefaced Midget with the 'old' 12" speaker, and a punchy beast it is – but this one promises higher thermal handling, a wider/cleaner response curve, and far more cone excursion to sock more air around the room. On its own, this new woofer has 'good response' to about 4kHz, with the 3" dome in the middle helping out up to 10kHz. The Faital HF driver, meanwhile, can reach down as far as 2kHz, but the knob on the back shifts the crossover point. Thus, knob full off, the HF driver is only adding 'air' above 10kHz; turn it up, and the HF driver begins to take a deeper share of upper frequency responsibility, until finally it's dealing with everything from 2kHz upwards.

In use

First let's try the 12" driver as best we can by turning the HF control knob off, fully clockwise (slightly counter-intuitive, that). We can't achieve a true A/B comparison with the old Midget because the cabinets are completely different, but the new driver does seem more balanced and capable throughout its range. With the amp set flat, the natural amount of bottom isn't excessive; you can dial in a ton of bass EQ at the amp and the BB2 will pump out those extra lows with consummate ease but, left alone, there's a sense of a restrained low end, more detailed and articulate mids, and limited yet smooth highs. If this type of slightly 'traditional' response is enough for you then the smaller, simpler 1x12" Super Compact might be an alternative way to go.

To get the full flavour of the BB2's capabilities we need to tell the HF driver to do more. The way the crossover is configured makes the change in the cab's performance more subtle, yet somehow more global, than anything you'd get from operating an old-school tweeter control (which usually meant turning down the flippin' thing until you could just about stand it). Thus the HF driver control gradually turns the BB2 into a truly transparent full-range, flat-response cabinet – though, with bass guitar, it still shows elements of a firm, punchy signature sound.

With all this clarity and openness on tap it would all too easy for this to morph into an amp review. For example, we found the BB2 conveyed all the rough, doggy roar of an Orange Terror Bass, but dialling in more HF driver added information and articulacy to the upper mids in a welcome way. Fed the more wide-ranging EQ options of an Aguilar TH500, the BB2 exposes the way its Drive and Gain knobs work together to create grit and EQ shaping and the precise nature of the amp's baked-in upper mids in a way that more forgiving cabs might well disguise. Chances are that what you put into the BB2, whether old-school valves or high-tech switch-mode, you'll get out.

We haven't mentioned volume. Well, the BB2 adores gobs of power and it can get ridiculously, stupidly loud. With enough amp yet with zero PA support in a crowded, fair-sized room, one of these can easily keep pace with a deranged, spiral-eyed drummer and a guitarist seemingly set on drowning out a jet plane on takeoff. Having gigged it, we'd guess that a BB2, given enough watts, should be able to handle almost any local-type indoor gig unsupported, and with a pair of them you'd be ready to cover a very large stage indeed.

There's a third aspect to the Big Baby 2, for its full-range, flat-response capabilities hint at an intriguing hook-up with modelled guitar sounds. Rigging up a Line 6 unit with a power amp giving 500W into the BB2's 8 Ohms, the sound is huge and extremely convincing, with fine spread around the room, highs that sound natural and unforced, and the potential of some shattering SPLs. We also performed some experimentation with an electro-acoustic rig and began to obtain results which were richly detailed and equally promising in scale.

Verdict

The Big Baby 2 is a very potent design. It's clear and revealing rather than retro and flattering, yet it can move from fat and fairly characterful bass goodness to super-accurate monitor-like sound reproduction at the twist of a knob. That means it's not just an epic bass cab but also a modelling guitar solution, a PA speaker, the centre of an electro-acoustic rig and no doubt a fine double bass cab. For volume you definitely won't be complaining, and the portability is a bonus. There are many cheaper speaker cabs, and a handful of more expensive ones, but we'd say that this one is close to being out on its own for cutting-edge technical specs and for real-world capabilities.

FINAL SCORE

BAREFACED BIG BABY 2	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Versatility	**20**/20
Sound	**19**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**92%**

FACTFILE

Barefaced Big Baby 2

DESCRIPTION **Bass guitar/all-purpose speaker cabinet. 8 Ohms, recommended amp power 150-800W. Made in the UK**
RRP **£699 (£739 with silver cloth grille)**

FEATURES **1x12" woofer plus HF driver. Rear panel: 2 x Speakon/jack sockets, HF/crossover control**

DIMENSIONS **56cm/22" high, 45cm/17.7" wide, 37cm/14.6" deep**
WEIGHT **13kg/29lbs (3lbs less with cloth grille)**
RANGE OPTIONS **Super Midget, 1x12" + tweeter, £599; Super Compact, 1x12", £549; Super Twin, 2x12", £799; Big Twin 2, 2x12" + HF driver, £999; Retro Two10, 2x10", £449; Retro Six10, 6x10", £999**

CONTACT **Barefaced Bass**
01273 945959
www.barefacedbass.com

Like this? Try this...

fEARful
12/6
Not a brand, exactly, but a range of designs from the US, fEARfuls are formidable nu-skool multi-driver bass cabs which can be built for you by approved makers in your own country (there are two in the UK). The 12/6 is a 12" + 6" unit
RRP **£500 approx**

TKS
1126
Built in Sweden and fast gaining popularity over here, TKS bass cabs are well-priced and offer some handsome added-cost vinyl/cloth options. This 12" + 6" model weighs about the same as the BB2 but handles less power
RRP **£649**

Marlene D., guitar department
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HOOKED ON CLASSICS

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Do we pay too much attention to the hallowed classics of the gear universe? **Phil Harris** loves them, but urges us to keep an open mind...

We all know that guitar collecting can be a very serious business, and that some people view old instruments as investments and as antique pieces. But there's always room, in my opinion, for us to indulge in our love of the wacky and wonderful. You could argue that, for my generation, a love of the leftfield was kicked into us from day one. Sure, we could catch glimpses of our heroes playing Fenders and Gibsons – and we could spend our Saturdays indulging in our favourite activity (what my brother called 'guitar grovelling') at all the local shops. However, the instruments that we could actually aspire to at the time – the likes of Burns, Hofner and Watkins – were vague approximations of the star-spangled guitars that fuelled our dreams. After all, the guitar I learned to play on had six control knobs that were kind of mixer controls that I'm pretty sure Einstein wouldn't have got to the bottom of, and the neck of Burns Vibra Artist was perfect for the likes of *Round The Horne's* Jimmy Clitheroe (only people of a certain vintage are going to get that, but you'll get that gist when I tell you that he wasn't the biggest man in the world).

Things like the fact that the Vibra Artist just got fatter and fatter until it joined the neck will seem strange now, but there are other things that seem normal these days but were incredibly wacky at the time. Even finishes like fiesta red were novelties at the time, particularly as guitar players (and that includes myself) would often take their guitars back to the natural finish.

When I was young musician on the circuit, you quickly realised that a lot of players were conservative in nature and just wanted quality Strats, Les Pauls, Teles and so forth. There weren't many competing with me to get hold of a Dan Armstrong Plexi... but that's their loss. I might have known after playing on one for two seconds that a Flying V wasn't really for me, but I still had to get a Gibson Firebird V from Bernie Marsden when he was looking to sell – even though I pretty much knew it was never going to be my main guitar.

The same thing applied to pedals, too. Along with pretty much everyone else, I was a big fan of things like the Crybaby Wah and a quality phaser, but that didn't stop me from looking further afield. I was very taken with the Lovetone Ring Stinger and the way it made your guitar sound like it might do on the moon, but I could never for the life of me work out how to incorporate it into a song.

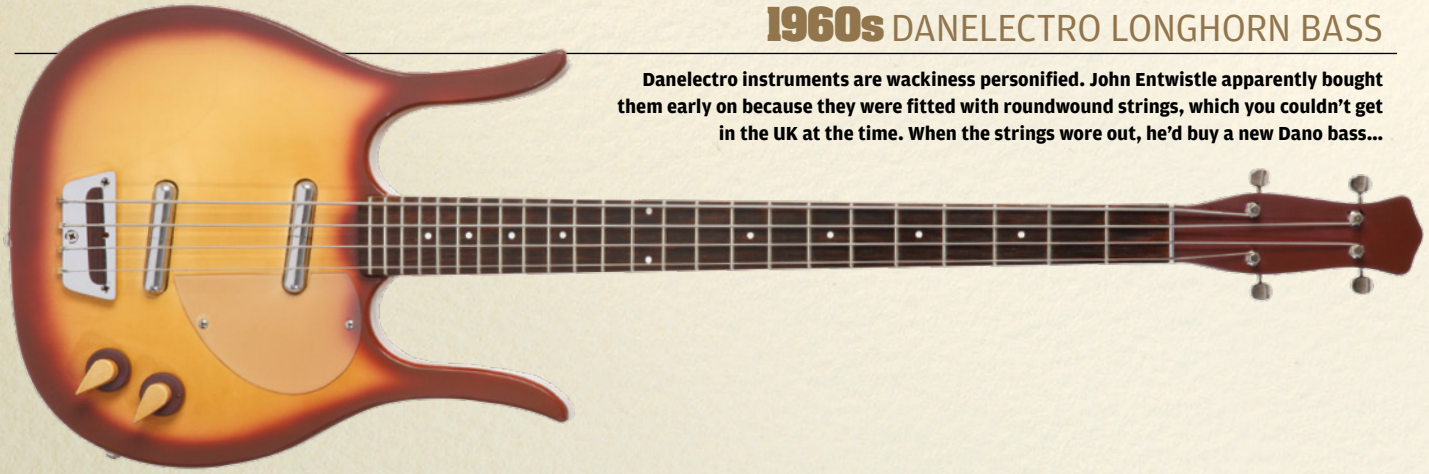
I could always be taken by a standard guitar that was somehow off the beaten path. I once saw a 1954 Strat that belonged to Steve Marriott that was fitted with full-sized Grovers (no mini-Grovers back in those days), which meant they couldn't be turned full circle. He must have tuned it by stretching the strings out. Now that's wacky...

There's also the memory of a Gretsch 6120 that I bought from Hank Cochran back in the '80s. The guitar had a lot of fine qualities, but what really swung it for me more than anything was the fact that the logo had been burned into it with a branding iron. I had to sell the guitar later on, and it still ranks up there as one of the ones that got away that I miss the most.

So I'd urge everyone to celebrate the wacky and wallow in the novel and innovative in all its forms. After all, all the things we now call 'classic' were once wacky in their own right. What follows are some of the off-the-beaten-path gear I've had over the years...

'I once saw a 1954 Strat that belonged to Steve Marriott with full-size Grovers that meant they couldn't be turned full circle. Now that's wacky'

1960s DANELECTRO LONGHORN BASS



Danelectro instruments are wackiness personified. John Entwistle apparently bought them early on because they were fitted with roundwound strings, which you couldn't get in the UK at the time. When the strings wore out, he'd buy a new Dano bass...

1976 COLORSOUND SUPA WAH FUZZ & SWELL

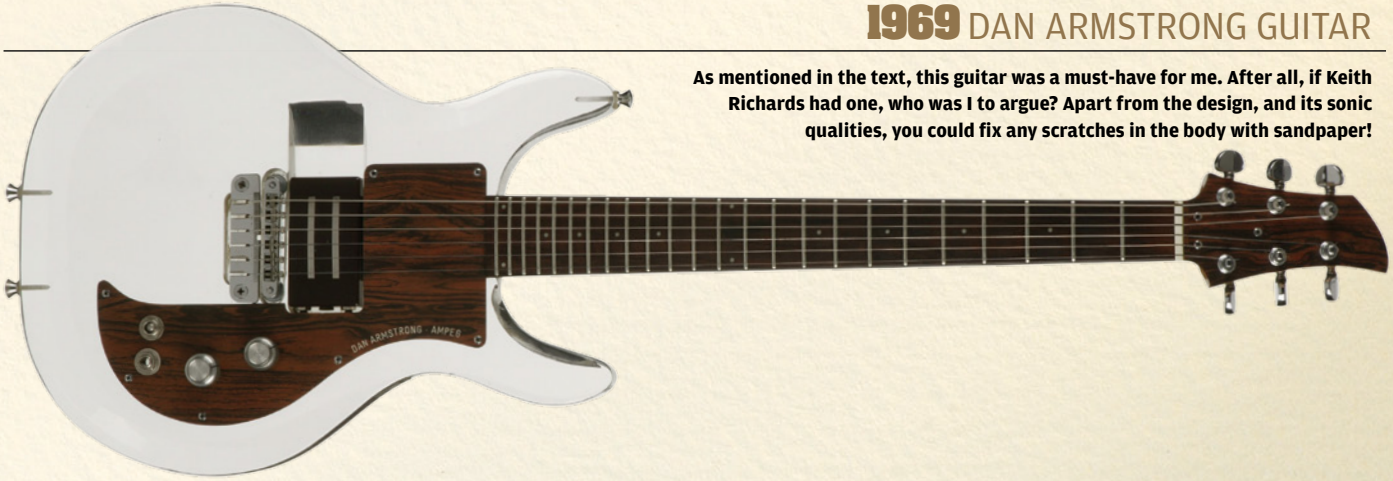
When I wanted to move on from the Crybaby, this became a real source of fun. Apart from the sonic larks that could be had with the three knobs, the sweep of the pedal ranged from rumbling bass to a pitch so high it would split any fillings you had

1980s X-PRESSOR SIMULATOR

Made by the great Dave Petersen, this pedal was truly unique. You plugged in, and then played your guitar with a metal plectrum that was also attached to the pedal. The result was that it played your guitar backwards in a way that blew every part of your mind. With this pedal, you didn't need drugs

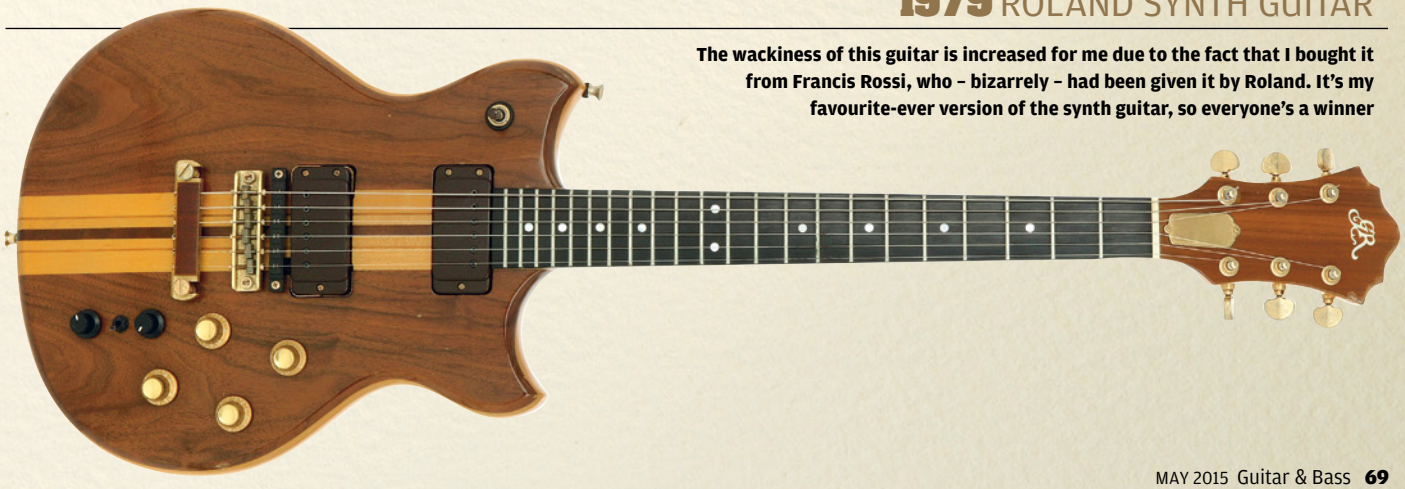
1969 DAN ARMSTRONG GUITAR

As mentioned in the text, this guitar was a must-have for me. After all, if Keith Richards had one, who was I to argue? Apart from the design, and its sonic qualities, you could fix any scratches in the body with sandpaper!



1979 ROLAND SYNTH GUITAR

The wackiness of this guitar is increased for me due to the fact that I bought it from Francis Rossi, who – bizarrely – had been given it by Roland. It's my favourite-ever version of the synth guitar, so everyone's a winner



One For THE ROAD

A Strat fan who's happy to stray into Gibson territory when the occasion demands it, Jim Kirkpatrick has a CV that stretches from blues to rock and from FM to Bernie Marsden and Thea Gilmour. Interview by Lars Mullen

For the past decade or so, Jim Kirkpatrick has been the guitarist in British rock band FM. Formed in 1984 by ex-members of Samson and Wildlife, the band toured with a host of big names and released five albums before disbanding in 1995. The year 2007 saw FM reuniting again, but various commitments meant a new six-stringer was needed – and this is where Jim came into the picture.

'I was actually in my local village pub on Christmas Eve, and I can't remember how, but I got talking to a lady who said her husband Steve Overland was a singer,' explains Jim. 'So I'm thinking, can it really be the guy from FM? I was a metal fan, so I knew all about the band. It turned out that it was, so we were introduced and we realised we lived a stone's throw from each other. So Steve started dropping in to visit me my studio from time to time, and we had a lot of fun jamming, writing some songs and recording a few tracks.

'At this point FM had been broken up for over 10 years, but Steve decided to put the band back together. Andy Barnett, the original guitarist, had moved to Malta, so that wasn't going to work, and I was asked to take his place. I knew a lot of the band's original songs already, and I'd grown up playing in bands of that kind of style.

'We tour quite a lot in Europe and Scandinavia. I think we were all a little surprised when we toured in Spain about four years ago – the band never used to visit there back in the day, so it was new territory for us, but the crowd response was overwhelming. The shows were sold out, even without a support act, even though the ticket prices out there are really high. It was so good to meet people who have been fans for 30 years. It's great to see women in the audience as well! Don't get me wrong, but I've been in a lot of blues bands where you just play to guys all night, every night!'

Jim's main early influences were Brian May, Jimi Hendrix and the Beatles. 'My parents had particularly bad taste in music,' he laughs, 'but luckily they adored Queen, as I did. I grew to admire Brian May's sound and style from the tapes we played over and over on long car journeys for summer holidays in the South of England. I learnt that he was also inspired by Jimi Hendrix, so from then on, I was – and still am – nuts about Hendrix, Strats, and single coil pickups.

'I bought my 1996 daphne blue American Standard Strat in 2003, way before FM. I was on my way to do my first session with British singer-songwriter Thea Gilmore with a Fender Strat Ultra, and dropped by a guitar shop on the way to buy a few sets of strings. I had no intention of buying a guitar, but the blue Strat just looked so cool on the wall!

'I was a little short of time but I had just long enough to try it, and it sounded so much better than the Ultra that I did a straight swap and used it right away in the studio that day. In fact, I used it for all the electric guitar parts on most of the albums I recorded with Thea, and all the tours I did with her as well.

Japanese/US '50s style parts Strat and a daphne blue US Standard Strat

Warmoth with Floyd Rose and H/S/S pickups and a Nash relic

'I really love this guitar. I rewired it so I have a master tone control for all three pickups – although, like most Strat players, I don't really use the tone control. I used to use it when playing slide to erase some of the harshness and for a nasal tone; Rory Gallagher used to do that a lot. This was my favourite Strat for many years. It's got such a warm sound.

'I usually prefer a rosewood fingerboard, but as a kid I had the Woodstock poster on the wall showing Hendrix with a white Strat and a maple fingerboard. I've got one which looks similar – it's a partscaster, really, but it sounds really nice. It's been around the block, as they say, and it comes complete with a headstock cigarette burn from one of my previous lives.

'For working with FM I need a guitar with at least one humbucker for a little more output, and this sunburst, maple-top Warmoth has a Lollar humbucker at the bridge and single coils in the middle and neck positions, so it fits the bill really well. This was my #1 FM stage guitar from about 2008 to around 2014. Our set list runs really fast; I don't have time to change guitars that often, so this pickup combination offers the versatility I need. There's quite a bit of vibrato stuff in our songs, and the Floyd Rose does the job. All the vibratos on my other Strats are almost bolted right down. A while ago I had to have the neck fixing re-doweled as the neck had broken away from the body, thanks to airline baggage handlers... once again. I do get a little nervous when my guitars are in the hold of the plane!'

Being in a popular rock band has its rewards. 'This other guitar, the worn one, is a Nash, built by Bill Nash in the USA. This one was actually given to me by a fan who kept bringing it to FM gigs saying I should try it. At first I politely said no, but eventually I agreed to give it a go. I love the feel of this guitar, and the Lollars sound wonderful. In fact, this guitar has actually nudged the blue Strat into second place.'

Jim's Highway One Telecaster has been a mainstay for over 10 years. 'I'd be totally lost without this guitar,' he says. 'It's been a life-safer in the studio so many times, and it's on every recording I've made with FM. The main parts on most FM tracks are done on guitars with humbuckers – a Les Paul through a Marshall, for example, and double-tracked. I then overdub with the Tele through maybe a Fender Twin or a Peavey Classic 50. It just gives the icing on the cake, the sparkle that only a Tele can provide. I also add the Tele to cleaner tracks on top of a Strat. I wouldn't be without this Tele... if I turned up at the studio and realised I'd forgotten it, I'd be driving home to pick it up!

'I do switch around here and there with stage guitars, ↔

Fender Highway One Tele and a green Burns Brian May

and I used this green Brian May model at the 02 Arena in London in 2012. I love it... it bought back those summer holidays again! I suppose it's a childhood dream guitar. I talked to the distributors and they offered me a green one at a good price, but I was saying "but Brian's is red, it has to be red". They didn't have one, but said if I used it in FM then I could have the green one. Here it is, and I've used it with the band on many occasions, and it's fine. The only thing is, whatever I seem to play, I just sound like Brian May... but isn't that what it's supposed to do?

'I have another "childhood guitar" here, a Gibson ES-335. It's odd but I've heard it said several times now how kids of my age were inspired by Michael J Fox when he played Marty McFly and duck-walked across the stage with a red Gibson in *Back To The Future* in '85. Of course, it was an ES-345 with a Bigsby, but a thousand kids must have bought similar guitars. It was an impulse buy, in 2004. I just walked in the shop and thought, "I'm having it".

"I couldn't believe how much money I spent thanks to that film, but it was a huge influence... so why not? I don't use it that much – just local gigs with friends, maybe the odd blues gig. I love the sound Clapton got using one in the video called *From The Cradle Rehearsals*. It's big sound from a big guitar.

'In comparison, this little Gibson Nighthawk from around '93 is relatively small, but what it lacks in size it makes up in sound. It's like an angry Tele. There was a period when I played this one non-stop for a year or so, but now I'm thinking of setting it up purposely for slide.'

FM fans will be well aware of Jim's prowess as a slide player. 'There's quite a bit of slide work in FM,' he says. 'You can also hear it on the band's new album, *Heroes And Villains*. It's the band's ninth album, the sixth one I've played on, and it'll be out in the spring. I'd been playing slide on and off for ages after hearing Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* album, but only over the last seven or eight years have I seriously knuckled down to get to a stage where I'm happy to play slide live with anybody – well, apart from Derek Trucks! Most of the time, I just use regular tuning.

'I always have a project running of some sort, especially when FM is taking a break. During 2014 I toured with my good friend Bernie Marsden, just the two of us on acoustic guitars, as special guests on the Joanne Shaw Taylor tour. This involved some close vocal harmony work and very delicate slide playing, and for that I used my well-worn and much-loved Takamine EAN10C. I've gigged this one flat-out and done a load of session work with it for about 17 years. This guitar is ideal for all occasions – folk, blues or riffy, rocky ↦

A 2004 Gibson ES-335 and a mid-'90s Gibson Nighthawk Special

'The ES-335 is a "childhood guitar". Lots of kids my age were inspired by Marty McFly with his red Gibson in Back To The Future'

Martin D-28, Seagull 12-string and Takamine EAN10C electro

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PRS SE Bernie Marsden signature and a PRS SE1

leadlines. When gigging with Bernie I have to be ready for anything as he rarely keeps to the set list, bless him! We've walked out on stage in front of 20,000 people and I haven't had a clue what the first number is going to be. It's all fine, though – we've known each other for so long and we have the same taste in music, so it all works well.

'The Takamine has stood up well to a lot of temperature changes out on tour with Thea, from blistering heat in Austin, Texas, to some really cold parts of Canada. During one of the USA tours I decided to replace it with this Martin D-28 which I bought in Pittsburgh Guitars, which was pretty close to the venue. It's a cool guitar, but to be honest the Takamine plays and sounds really good, and I think that with the built-in preamp it's the better all-round guitar for live work.'

Jim's been lucky in finding guitars in the dusty corners of shops. 'Trouble is, there aren't many shops around with cool guitars "out the back" now,' he sighs. 'I had a real need for a 12-string acoustic not long ago, and came across a Seagull in a local guitar shop. I tried quite a few new ones, but this was in the secondhand rack for just £275, and it was the best one for tone, playability and volume in the whole shop. I used it on the last FM album and also on *Heroes And Villains*.'

'Bernie Marsden did a guest spot with FM, and at the end he just handed me his PRS SE signature model and said "Merry Christmas"'

1961 Gibson SG Jr, '58 Framus archtop and a Japanese Kay solidbody

Our attention turns back to electrics with a couple of PRS guitars. 'After I did the Joanne Shaw Taylor tour with Bernie, he did a guest spot with FM right before Christmas,' Jim explains. 'I'd commented how good his new PRS SE signature model had sounded on several occasions, and at the end of the show he just handed me the guitar and said "Merry Christmas" – and here it is.

'It's a lovely guitar, it really is, and I'm not just saying that – I don't really know how they do it for the money. I've also got this PRS SE1 which has a really sharp top end, so I have to roll back the treble on the amp a little. It's obviously limited a little with just one P90 and one volume knob, but it's a formula which has worked so many times.

'This Gibson SG Junior dates from '61. The previous owner had always it on a stand facing the sun, so over the years the front has faded to an almost light brown colour, which I really like, while the back is still the original cherry red. It's all there, complete with the snakeskin case. Needless to say it stays in the lock-up now as it's a bit too precious and fragile to tour with... it's so thin that I don't think it would survive getting knocked over. The SG Junior is a favourite for so many slide players, not just for the ripping sound from the single P90, but because the cutaway gives great access to the higher frets.' ↔

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Modern Supro resonator and a '58 Gretsch restored to Jet Firebird specs

Tracking down the next guitar takes Jim a fair while. 'I'm sure there's an old '50s archtop acoustic in here somewhere,' he mutters. 'Let's just move a few skeletons and stuffed tigers...

'Ah yes, here we are, a Framus archtop acoustic, from 1958, to be exact. I think this one is from the company's Studio series – perfect for authentically jazzy bluesy late night sessions on the porch, with a beer of course.

'I've tried – with some success – to echo the kind of sounds these old guitars made on record with modern instruments, but I think if you want to create a sound that really represents that era, using a guitar from the same period does help. I'm into old vintage guitars, but when it comes down to it, in my job I need a guitar that does the job efficiently.'

The much-played and very corroded Gibson Les Paul

The next guitar could most kindly be described as 'budget' – a Japanese-made Kay-branded solidbody with a very approximate Gibson influence. 'I'm sure at the time Kay were really proud of this,' Jim grins. 'This was just a good deal I saw at a car boot sale recently. I wouldn't have bought it if it was in a shop, but maybe the excitement of seeing an old guitar for sale in a field got the better of me! It was cheap, so why not... it's nice to have, and it's fun playing detective online. So far, though, I can't identify the exact model as there are so many different Kays out there.

'I love the way the Les Paul plays, but it's just so heavy. It does sound nice though, solid as a rock, with plenty of sustain. I tour with it a lot'

Gretsch Electromatic G5120 and a '70s Antoria ES-175 replica with added Bigsby

Next, a well-used Gibson Les Paul. 'You can't help sweating in a loud rock band... there's nothing wrong with that, unless you have sweat like hydrochloric acid like I have,' Jim mourns. 'You can see it on my Les Paul – just look at all the corrosion on the pickup covers and bridge saddles. Whenever we tour, my guitar tech Ian Dunbar is forever cleaning my guitar hardware. I used to have the same problems with strings – after 40 minutes they'd be completely dead, so for several years I've used Elixirs, which work very well.

'I bought this Les Paul on eBay from a guy who lived in Boston, Lincolnshire, but he wouldn't ship it. I had to drive up from London to collect it; all I had was a picture but it looked amazing, so I was going by instinct.

'I love how it sounds and plays, but it's just so heavy – much heavier ↔

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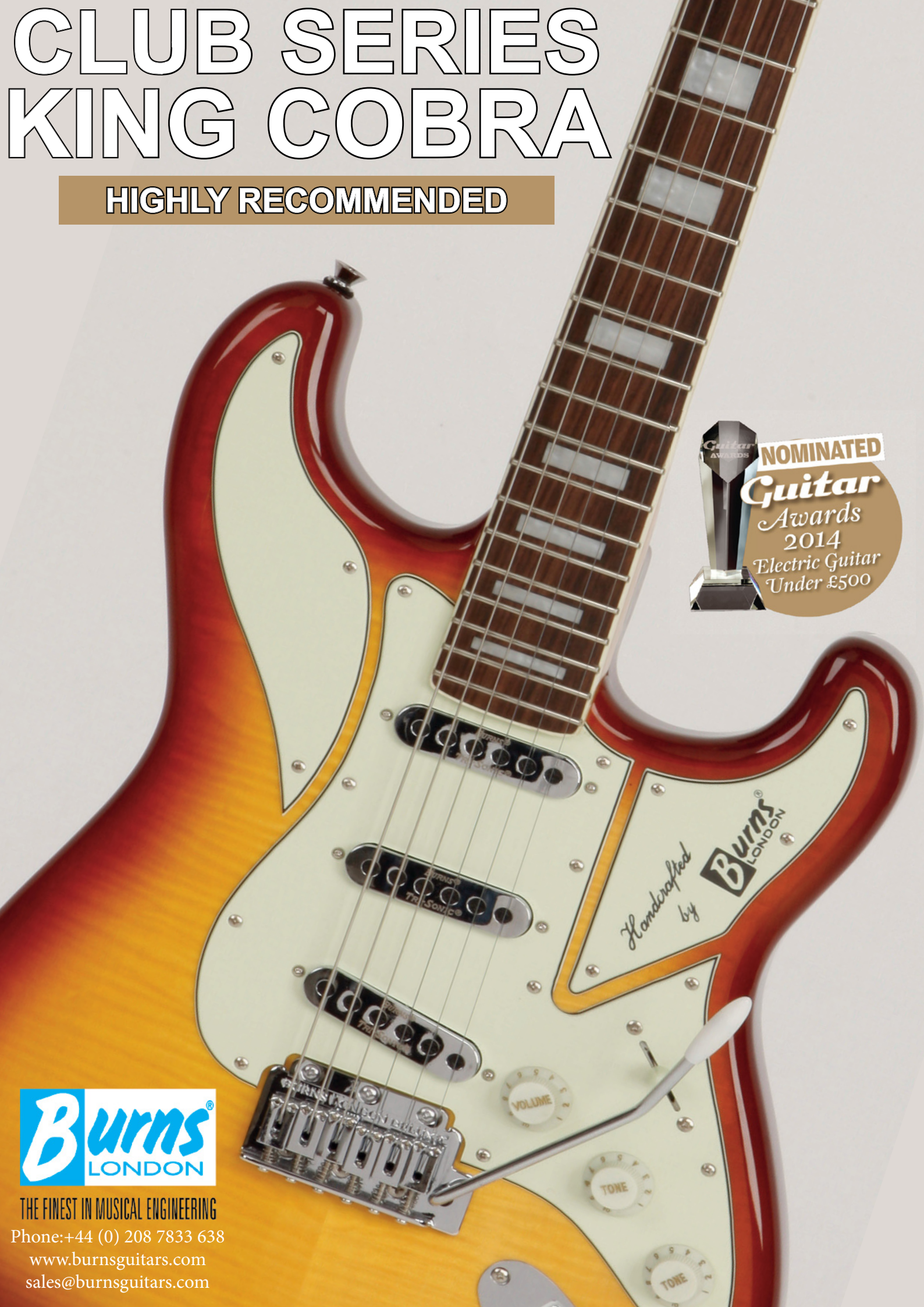

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New favourites: one of a pair of EVH Wolfgang Specials

than other Les Pauls I've tried, and if we're shooting a video and it's "take 25"!" then I'm starting to feel a bit weary. It does sound nice though, solid as a rock, with plenty of sustain. I've given it the Peter Green wiring mod and I tour a lot with it.

'I also have a metal-bodied Supro resonator guitar which gets used for slide. For an off-the-shelf Korean-made resonator, it's pretty good. I'm not that fussed about keeping it highly polished, it fits in perfectly in this dusty old garage where we are today. This place is owned by my good friend Billy Gibbons... no, not ZZ Top's Billy F Gibbons, another one – he's a bit of a radio and TV star in the UK's North West of the UK, and his rockabilly shows are rammed every time.

'My Gretsch Jet Firebird also looks the part in here. It dates from '58, and it was a real mess when I got it, so I've spent quite a while restoring it back to looking pretty good for a guitar from that period. This also stays in the lock-up, as I just feel it's also a bit too precious to tour with these days.

'I've used the old Gretsch a few times in Billy's rockabilly shows, but the two main guitars I use for those gigs are this big-bodied Gretsch Electromatic, finished of course in orange, and a rather rare large single-cutaway Antoria semi-acoustic. Both have that big, big sound – playing an open E minor chord through a clean amp with a bit of slapback and a little quiver on the Bigsby is enough to get Billy's winklepickers pointing skyward!

'I'm not sure of the age of the Antoria, it's probably from the '70s as the label in the f-hole says "Ibanez". I'm told that's when Antoria were made in the Ibanez factory. It's got all the nice touches like the parallelogram-position markers and a really nice maple top with an intricate body binding. I use the middle pickup position on both of these guitars for that nasally, cutting-but-warm Gene Vincent sound through a big, clean valve amp. It's a cool guitar without doubt, and possibly quite collectable... I've not seen another for sale anywhere.'

'I've been knocked out recently by the EVH Wolfgang Special. I thought, if Eddie Van Halen designed it, I ought to give it a fair trial'

Jim's Les Paul might soon be up for retirement, as he's just found a new love for live work. 'I'm starting to move in a new direction,' he explains. 'I've been trying out a pair of EVH Wolfgang Specials, one with a gorgeous quilt top in tobacco burst and one in gloss black. They didn't catch my eye for ages until I had the opportunity to do a rehearsal with one, and I was knocked out by the tone and how light it was. I'm thinking, well, if Eddie Van Halen designed it, I ought to give it a fair trial.

'They're both Japanese models with USA hardware including the drop D Floyd Rose and the pickups. I'm using the black one all the time now and it's looking very much like the new #1 live for FM and probably the humbucking guitar in the studio too, as it's all over *Heroes And Villains*.

'Hopefully I'll be settled for a while with the Wolfgangs, but I don't think I'll lose my wandering eye for guitar collecting. As I keep telling my wife, I need them as we're always looking for new sounds, and that's a never-ending search... and my taste in guitars changes daily! So, about that new house extension, my dear...'

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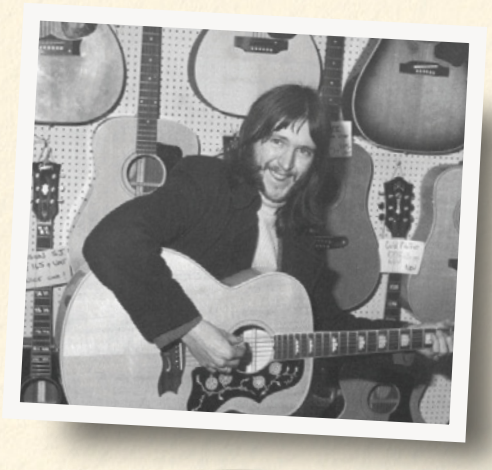
THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF AMPS PART 2



This month **Sid Bishop** eases into the '70s and beyond to find out how much guitar amplification has changed...

During the '60s, new companies entered the amp market. Some continued to use valves, others went down the solid-state route, and some did both. Newcomers by the end of the decade included Orange, Impact, Kelly, Traynor, Kustom, Burman, Carlsbro, Sound City, and Vamp, amongst others. The chief designer/engineer for Sound City was an industry legend named Dave Reeves, who eventually severed his ties with this company and began making his own range of amps, Hiwatt, from around 1970 or 1971. Dave Reeves is no longer with us, but his amps are, though now made by a different company.

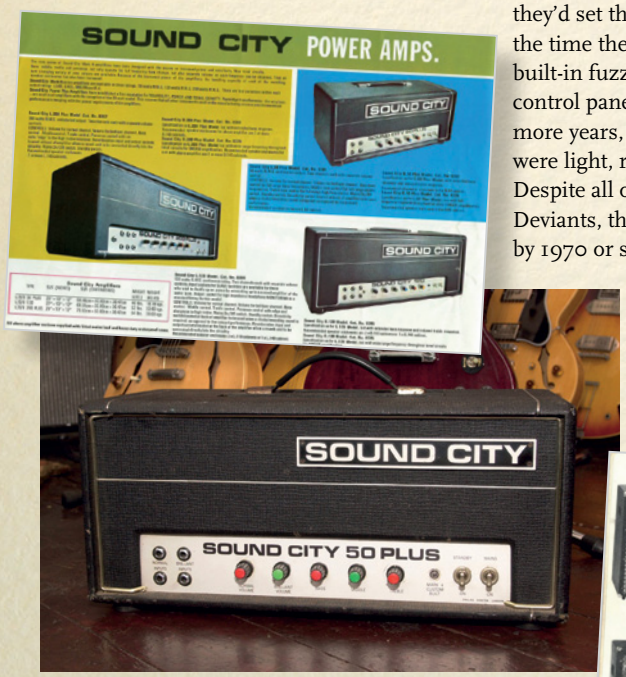
The Japanese were getting in on the act, and first-generation Rolands and Yamahas were turning up in shops all over the country, while the Guyatone brand was already fairly familiar to many UK musicians. Makers from continental Europe ought not to be overlooked, and we should tip our hats to Davoli, Echolette and Binson, although their dated designs could never hope to compete with the leading British and American names.

Triumph – a company who made electronic medical and diagnostic equipment and had their office next door to the old Orchid ballroom in Purley, Surrey – was a brand I had a personal involvement with. For some bizarre reason they decided to branch out into amplification, and made those little Leo-branded practice amps. In 1967 I was playing in the Deviants and we had (deviously) obtained a Triumph endorsement deal. They gave us a vanload of their gear, all 100W transistor heads, 4x12" guitar and bass cabinets, in both guitar and bass versions, and a complete PA. I don't think they'd set the world on fire these days, but at the time they were quite something, having built-in fuzz, reverb and a fully illuminated control panel. We gigged these for two or more years, but we never had a failure; they were light, reliable and very, very loud. Despite all of that, and the assistance of the Deviants, they disappeared from the market by 1970 or so. So had the band.

Orange and Hiwatt set new standards for volume and tone and were used by the Who, Pink Floyd and others

The '70s saw this vibrant market expand still more, and other makers such as H&H, Polytone and Maine entered the fray. 1973 also witnessed the first solid state slimline Marshall amps. To say that were not a great success could be a bit of an understatement, and sales were poor. They were dropped from the catalogue fairly promptly and it wasn't until recent years that they introduced a range of more efficient and reliable solid-state amps.

A dominant brand during the '70s and beyond was Peavey. Hartley Peavey had been a



Sound City amps were first built in the rear of a West End music shop and designed by Dave Reeves with the help of Denis Cornell

Below, the ill-fated Triumph brand, as hammered by Sid himself, and the famous tuck-and-roll Kustoms

Line 6, now a big name in amplification, launched in 1996

We've reached a point where there's an amp out there for everybody, but you might have to work through a few to find the right one

keen amp repairer who began working from his own garage as long ago as 1965, and he ultimately went into full production with his own amplifier line. He made valve amplifiers at first following traditional formats, but in time realised the advantages of transistors. He was one of the first makers to come up with the concept of a 'hybrid' – an efficient solid-state input stage with a warm-sounding valve output stage. Peavey's amps were first imported by us at Top Gear into the UK. In time they became the market leaders,thanks to their comprehensive range of solid-state and valve amps, from small practice and studio models, right up to full backline.

By the end of the '70s and into the '80s Marshall had gone back to valves, Orange went into hibernation for 10 years or so, Selmer, Kelly, Maine and Sound City had vanished from the marketplace, H&H had gone bust and had been bought out by Carlsbro, Epiphone, Gibson and Guild had ceased producing amps altogether (aside from the Lab Series made by Gibson's Norlin parent company borrowing some clever Moog circuitry), Rickenbacker were producing only small studio and practice amps, and we were witnessing the final setting of the Sunn, erm, sun, culminating in their purchase by Fender in the mid-'80s. Yet the '70s and "80s saw considerable advances in the production of hybrid amps. Some – Peavey, Musicman, Mesa Boogie – used the SS preamp format with a valve power stage, but others did things the other way around, thus negating the necessity of a heavy power transformer. The now-discontinued Fender Performer series is a good example, and there are several others.

By the '90s the invention of the microprocessor made yet more significant advances possible. We began to see amps with dozens of built-in effects, some even giving us the ability to reproduce the tone of a wealth of legendary classics, and the press of a button would enable us to instantly obtain the sound of a JTM45, or a blackface Twin, a tweed Fender Concert and dozens more.

I've owned two modelling amps in recent years. The first, which I will not name, was one of the earliest and really not very good, sounding 'clangy' and being confusing and cumbersome to operate. The second was a Behringer Vintage 60 equipped with a Jensen 12" speaker. This turned out to be a really good amp tonally and volume-wise. Accessing effects was easier, though I had to constantly remember the location of the one I required, and with 99 to choose from I had to write the relevant numbers down on a sheet of paper. I sold the amp and went back to using a low-tech Fender 85 and stomp pedals.

I've recently seen amplifiers with not just built-in effects and infinite amounts of pre-set classic amp tones,but also with programmable drum machines and even bass lines. I'm guessing that the idea is that you can pre-programme an entire set, then go to the pub or club and do a gig solo; just a little guitar playing and some singing would be required. From an audience standpoint I would think this would be a very dull gig to watch, and from the performer's point of view you'd just need to press one wrong button, and you'd be stuffed. It all makes me wonder what the future might hold.

We've now reached a point where there's an amp out there for everybody, but you might have to work through a few to find the right one. If you're fixated on the warmth and tone of valves then there's one for you, and the younger generation, totally at ease with all the latest computer-based technology, can find something suitable too. There are many hundreds more between those two extremes. The explosion in the production capabilities of the Chinese over the past few years means that good quality band equipment is available to us all at moderate prices, though if you are of the opinion that a handmade boutique example that costs the same as a small flat in Croydon is for you, and you've convinced yourself that it's worth the investment, well, it's your money!

Peavey amps, stage mainstays from the 1970s onwards

Top, an affordable Behringer modelling amp; below, the king of kleen, a tranny Roland Jazz Chorus 120

These days you can edit sounds from your phone, yet the high-end valve amp market is still strong

American TREASURY

BANJOS, ZITHERS & STEELS

Just off Route 66 lies one of the most astonishing repositories of stringed Americana in the world, the work of dedicated enthusiast Rob Lurvey. **David Plues** takes the tour

Some of you might remember an episode of the TV show *Billy Connolly's Route 66*, where the comedian was taken to a secret location and was given a tour of what is probably the world's largest collection of steel guitars and stringed instruments. That incredible collection belongs to Rob Lurvey of Springfield, Missouri, who has amassed a hoard of over 3500 guitars, steels, amps, banjos and zithers, plus a wealth of memorabilia. It's nothing short of a conservatory for stringed instruments. Rob is respected all over the world for his dedication into preserving these historic items, and he's meticulous in recording the details of everything in the collection.

It's all housed in a building of no less than 13 separate rooms, situated just off the hallowed Route 66 freeway. Rob began our grand tour starting with his 'banjo room'... impressive, but there was nothing to indicate what was to follow. Banjos, mandolin banjos, piccolo banjos, five-strings and four--strings plus ukuleles and zithers line the walls and display cabinets, and it's already becoming apparent just how early and rare some of these instruments are; the banjos date back to the beginning of the 20th century and include such items as a rare pre-1915 Epiphone made by Anastasios Stathopoulo, creator of the Epiphone company. As a banjo player himself, it's easy to understand Billy Connolly's joy in seeing these.

The micellaneous banjo section includes a number of mandolin banjos

Zithers were hugely popular parlour instruments in the late 19th century, and Rob's collection includes such pieces as a Washburn zither from 1895 and Schwarzer Company zithers manufactured in Missouri and dating from as early as 1865 – exceptional examples with fine inlays, and two with concurrent serial numbers. They featured 'piano' bottoms, rather like Steinway pianos, and scalloped internal bracing, as found on the best Martin steel-strung guitars.

But all this is merely a preamble to the next three rooms, which are enough to take your breath away. This is the start of the collection dedicated to steel guitars, both lap steel and console models. Twin necks, single necks with matching amplifiers, low serial numbers, sets of up to seven steels all

with slight variations of inlay and design; row upon row, all presented to perfection, with entire walls devoted to one manufacturer or a particular era. The consoles, twin-necks and triple-necks are arrayed six-deep on the floor, with plenty of Gibsons and Fenders on show.

Rob began collecting steel guitars when he was just 14 years old. 'I'm now 63, so that's 49 years, but my serious collecting has been for the last 30 years,' he says. 'In the early days it was answering ads, talking to local players... the usual sources. With the advent of vintage guitar shows in the '80s things became more hectic, and word soon went round there was a guy on the lookout for certain kinds of instruments. This was still in the pre-internet age, but when that revolution happened, it took collecting to a new level.'

So what made Rob concentrate on the steel collection to begin with? 'They were cheap and no one wanted them,' he smiles. 'I still have a list of about 80 steels that I'm looking to acquire, and this would complete the known models of the major companies. However, I continue to discover steels that are not commonly known.

'I do have limits on what I'll pay. Condition is important, but rarity, to me, is more important still. Some I bought as whole collections, and in many cases people were happy to part with instruments at sensible prices. I have many stencilled flat-top guitars which only cost a few dollars.'

The first room of steels is made up of instruments which don't fall into recognised groups; to an ordinary collector this would be a fine selection on its own, but to Rob it is a place for odds and ends and lesser-known manufacturers. He pointed out a recent acquisition, a red Aloha, a steel-bodied guitar produced in Chicago. Next to this is a beautiful two-tone green Emmons eight-string lap steel, a very rare guitar from a company that specialised in pedal steels. There are two steels by Kiesel, an early incarnation of the Carvin brand (the name 'Carvin' was a combination of Carson and Gavin, Lowell Kiesel's two sons).

On the rear wall is a selection of lap steels by Electromuse, Audiovox and Premier; the octagonal Audiovox steels are very early, and were made in Seattle by electric instrument pioneer Paul Tutmarc at around the same time as the Rickenbacker guitars were first being produced. Rob also has many examples of 'mother of toilet seat' steels, which were covered in acetone-softened sheets of pearloid of the type often reserved for decorating accordions or drums.

Rob points out his pre-Epiphone Stathopoulo banjo-mandolin

A Schwarzer zither, part of a near-forgotten chapter in music instrument history

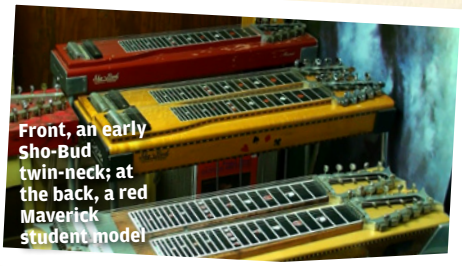
Assorted steels including two octagonal Audiovox models from the '30s

Leonard Stadler's Marlen company made fine-quality pedal steels in North Carolina

Emmons lap steel flanked by assorted pearloid examples

On the floor we spy a JB Frypan, based on the iconic cast aluminium Rickenbacker 'frying pans' of the 1930s. Made in collaboration between the great steel guitarist Jerry Byrd and Sho-Bud of Nashville, these were excellent instruments. Rob has a Marlen pedal steel with two banks of pedals on the floor for the E9 and C6 necks, a very unusual configuration. Another rare item comes in the form of a double 11-string MSA pedal steel; a couple of tasty Sho-Buds and a ZB are hidden away in the corner, and at the front of the room is a Harlen-built metal-bodied Kalina Multi-Kord, one of the earliest types of tuning-changing pedal steel, dating from the early 1940s.

The third room is even larger, and here the steels are arranged in triple rows representing of all the major makers. We have some stylish and underrated Vega steels; examples of 10-string Alkire E-harps with their unique tunings; and Melobar steels, which look ↔


Front, an early Sho-Bud twin-neck; at the back, a red Maverick student model

Four steels from the Vega company

Melobar steels, an invention of the '60s

Detail of the Harlan Kalima Multi-Kord

A Jerry Byrd Fry-Pan by Sho-Bud; later models were by Excel of Japan

fantastic, with tilted fretboards that allow them to be played standing up (Rusty Young of Poco was seen playing in this fashion).

It's hard to imagine another place on earth where you could see an array of Valco-built off-brands like Bronson, McKinney, Silvertone, Fulltone and Gretsch lined up, all in chronological order. There are also plenty of National steels, Valco's top brand, including space-age Dynamics and art deco New Yorkers, each one slightly different, plus rare sights like a steel/amp set in matching red pearloid with consecutive serial numbers, and a curvacious twin-neck Oahu Iolana, another product of National-Valco, named after the famous Hawaiian princess Ealanah, with a striking tuner design.

Another big name in lap steels was Magnatone, who manufactured complete amp/steel sets under many names including Dickerson, Bronson and Leilani, often for Hawaiian guitar teaching studios or music stores. Rob has few particularly rare sets, including a Leilani amp/steel in purple pearloid and another set in green pearloid badged as a Gourley Mastertone (Ray Gourley was a salesman and later owner of the company). Art deco fans would love the three Magnatone Jeweltones, made from plexiglass, and very heavy; Rob has only seen half a dozen in his time, and has all three colour combinations; black/white, blue/clear, and red/clear. The detail in these instruments is fantastic, even down to the matching tuner buttons and control knobs in coloured layers.

The JB Fry-Pan, a collaboration between Jerry Byrd and Sho-Bud, was based on the iconic Rickenbacker 'frying pans' of the '30s

We're nowhere near finished with the steels, as next comes the 'Harmony Room'. The first item is a Harmony Consolette, a steel which formed the lid of the amplifier box; just pack it up and go. There are three matching Roy Smeck steels with curvy cream bodies, black necks and white fingerboards; Roy Smeck was a fine musician and put his name to many instruments of the day, including Gibsons.

The Epiphone wall, meanwhile, has almost every single Epiphone steel ever produced, with the exception of just two – and Rob, typically, has sourced them both, and is currently talking with the owners. He has two of the earliest steels the company produced, the oval-bodied Electrophones, plus a triple-neck console which was one of only a few built and which belonged to Roy Fuller, steel player for Porter Waggoner. Fuller bought his Epiphone in about 1956 while he was playing the Louisiana Hayride; his wife gave him the ultimatum 'it's me or the steel', and Roy hid it under the bed for the next 30 years. It took Rob a few years to finally buy this great piece of history. The remaining floor space ➔

A vast array of National-Valco steels of all designs

Rare plexiglass Magnatone Jeweltones

Harmony Consolette with the steel mounted on the amp's reversible lid

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A whole row of angular, copper-coloured 1960s Harmony H-1 lap steels

A trio of Harmony Roy Smeck steels

Just two of the many vintage Fenders on display

The awesome Epiphone Wall

Roy Fuller's triple-neck Epiphone console steel

The 'Epiphone wall' has every steel the company ever produced, except two – which Rob has sourced

is dedicated to Fender steels: pedal steels, Stringmasters, Deluxes and many more. If they had been pre-CBS Strats and Teles, then the value would be astronomical.

At first some vintage children's toys look strangely out of place, but in the Depression years Gibson resorted to making wooden toys in an attempt to keep employees occupied. Rob had heard whispers of these and had seen the advert in the Gibson catalogue, and after 24 years of searching he acquired his Kalamazoo Kala-Kar pull toy at an antique mall in Springfield, Ohio on the way to a guitar show. This super-rare item takes pride of place in his display cabinet.

Back to the collection, and the final room, dedicated to Gibson and Gretsch. As with the previous Fender and Epiphone collections, this room displays the high end of the market, and to try and put a value on all the items would be pointless. The collection has been geared towards obtaining every model with all the variations; there are a few Gibson Ultratone steels missing, but these can be especially hard to find as they share a number of parts with sought-after vintage six-string guitars such as Les Paul Standards, making them easy targets for parts-strippers intent on selling rare components to high-end guitar collectors and dealers. Still, there's more than enough to be getting on with. We start with a prewar Gibson Electraharp, which was the thousandth instrument that Rob bought in his long journey. The previous owner was Tom Wittrock, a noted Gibson guitar collector who had owned it for a number of years. As Rob was approaching his milestone acquisition, Tom agreed it would be a significant addition to his collection. They agreed on a price, and the Electraharp was duly acquired. Gibson manufactured only approximately 10 of these expensive, flamed maple-bodied console steels, and this is #3.

The stylish six-string Gibson Century was made in several variations and examples are readily available, but Rob's black 10-string Century is quite unusual, with only about 90 ever having been made. There's an EH-185, which illustrates one of Gibson's rare forays into combining metal and wood construction; Rob also has some EH-100s and BR3s, both great-sounding steels, and in demand from a new generation of players.

We also see some BR6s and a rare and very striking cream-coloured BR6B, plus a couple of BR9s with their cream lacquer and brown plastic fingerboards and hand-rests. The Gibson Skylark steels are made of korina wood, the same timber used ➔

Yes, the milk cart toy is a real Gibson... and extremely scarce

1941 Gibson Electraharp

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Two Gibson EH-150s, an EH-125 and an EH-100

More Gibson steels, with a trio of korina-bodied Skylarks in the centre

on the Explorers and the mythical Moderne. Rob once joined forces with fellow guitar enthusiast Dave Crocker at one of the Arlington Guitar Shows to grab the rare chance to exhibit the full Gibson korina range; lap steels, consoles, and even a genuine Explorer and a Flying V.

The final range of Gibsons were the Century models, and Rob has a blue model with a flowered handrest and a late '60s example in cherry red; these were only made for a very short time and are again very rare.

The steel collection finishes with a large array of Rickenbacker models. There are the steel-bodied types, from basic painted models up to nickel-plated Silver Hawaiians, plus a Deluxe 6 version of the latter with gold parts and the later, narrower 1.25" pickup ; the wider, 1.5" pre-war pickup is considered more tonally desirable. Using the very same pickups were the Model B bakelites, which came with plated brass body covers or, during the war period, white-painted metal or white celluloid covers. Rob has a wealth of these great-sounding bakelites in six-string, seven-string, eight-string and 10-string versions. He also has a googly number of other

Six fine Rickenbacker bakelites; the earliest is second from left

Rickenbackers, including wood-body laps. consoles, and the crinkle-finish, metal-bodied, Bakelite-necked doubleneck with the white and red knobs pictured below.

In this article we've only scratched the surface of half of Rob Lurvey's collection. After 30 years of hard work buying, documenting and displaying, he now has a gathering of instruments of a level of importance that's impossible to overstate, a slice through musical instrument technology of the 20th century which will be appreciated by both musicians and the general public for many years to come.

BR9s with details reversed

Left and centre, two different Gibson Centurys; right, a Royaltone

This Gibson Century isn't very rare in a six-string, but the 10-string on the left is

Metal-bodied Rickenbacker 7/7 doubleneck

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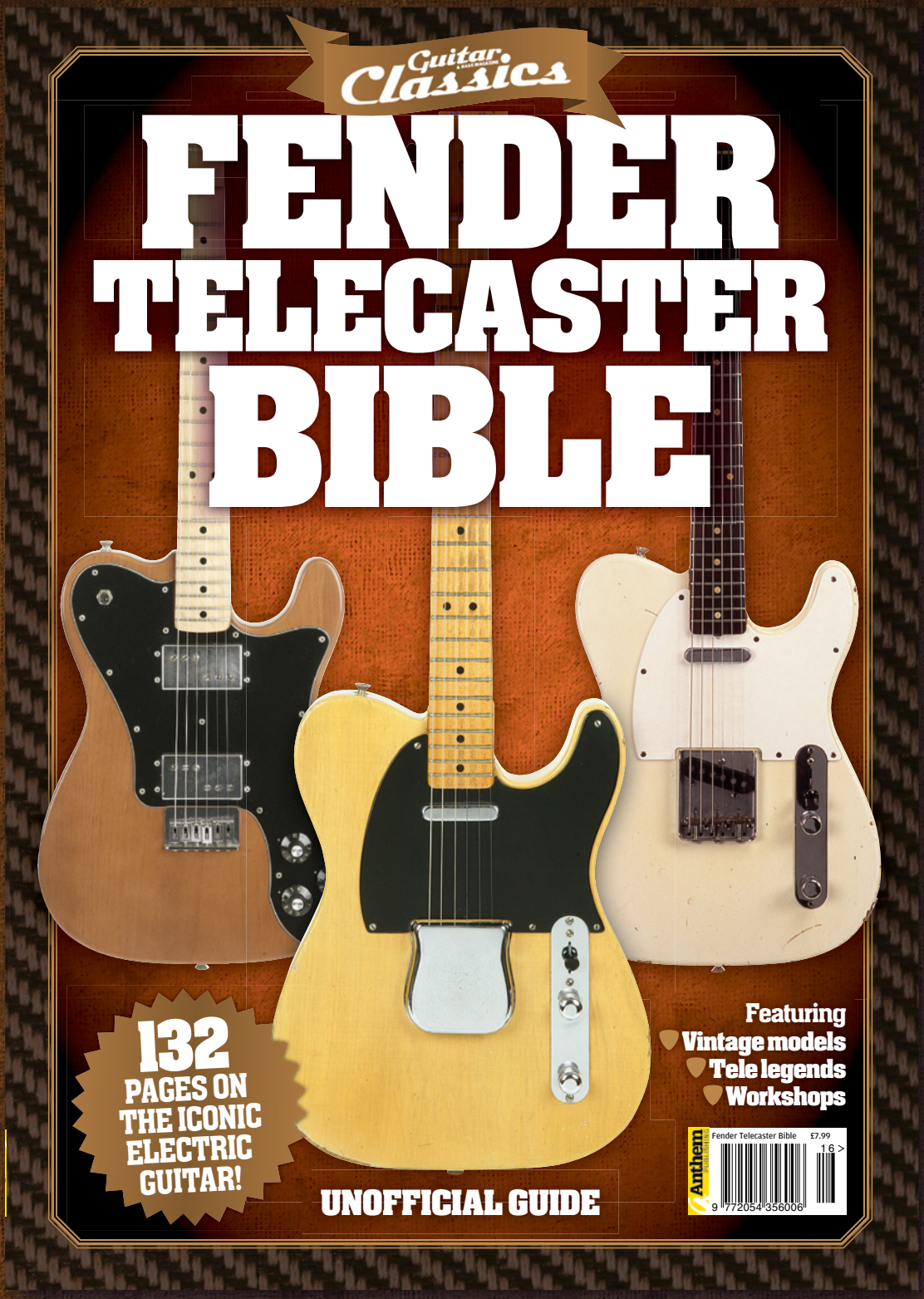

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Left, a '51 Supro Supreme. Above: catalogue pages from 1954 and 1959

Supro AMPS

Cheap, cheerful and ever-changing, Supros were the affordable alternatives to the big-name amps of the '50s and '60s and had a raucous sound all their own. **Michael Heatley** has the story...

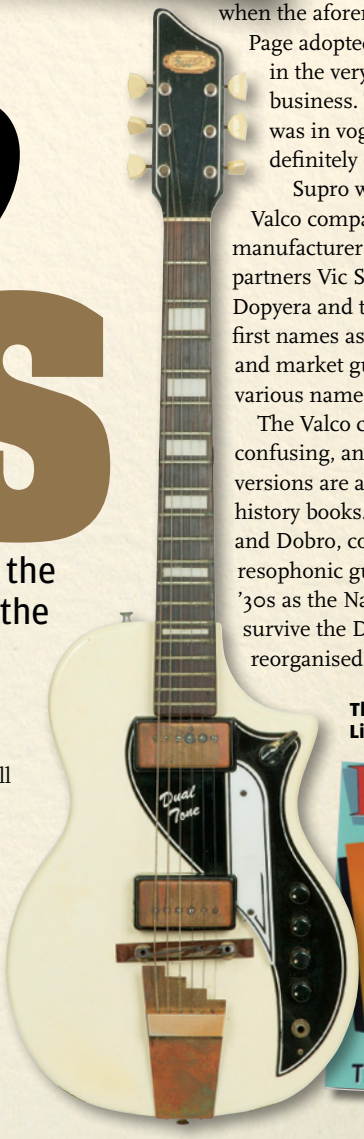
The grand old name of Supro has recently returned to the spotlight with a series of amplifiers based on some old favourites of the past. The Supro story clearly has pages yet to be written – but, with due respect to current endorsees like Steve Stevens, Richard Fortus, David Hidalgo and Rick Vito, they will have to form an orderly queue behind such names as Jimi Hendrix and Jimmy Page as the highest-profile fans of the brand.

This wasn't a story led by a Leo Fender or Jim Marshall pushing back the frontiers of sound. Supro, despite its distinctive lightning-underlined logo, was content to be outshone, selling on price and value rather than imitation. And no matter how often hopeful dealers draw parallels to similarly configured Fenders, Supros were limited-output valve amps that tended to misbehave if pushed to their limits.

Paradoxically, that drawback would prove their saving grace when they appeared on vintage amp enthusiasts' radar, and a personality finally emerged in the Supro story when the aforementioned James Patrick Page adopted the brand – coincidentally, in the very year they went out of business. The overdriven valve sound was in vogue, and cheap was most definitely cheerful.

Supro was a product of the Valco company. The Chicago-based manufacturer – formed by business partners Vic Smith, Al Frost and Louis Dopyera and taking the initials of their first names as its moniker – would make and market guitars and amplifiers under various names through to the late '60s.

The Valco company's history is highly confusing, and several equally plausible versions are available on the web and history books. Suffice to say that National and Dobro, competing manufacturers of resophonic guitars, came together in the '30s as the National-Dobro Company to survive the Depression. In 1942, they reorganised once more as Valco; Supro



The Dual-Tone has been used by Link Wray, Zappa and Bowie

was their house brand. Valco started manufacturing Hawaiian guitars and amplifiers under its own name and as a subcontractor for Oahu, Harmony, Airline, Kay, National and Gretsch.

The guitars

The postwar guitar boom saw Valco make instruments in many shapes and sizes. As respected writer Tom Wheeler put it, 'If you wanted to step up from your bargain-basement Harmony and couldn't afford an Epiphone... then Valco was the place to go.' Supro remained resolutely price-conscious, their marketing deliberately un-trendy. 'Don't let the moderate price fool you,' they warned on the cover of the 1960 guitar and amp catalogue. 'Supro products perform with excellence and many are unequalled in their price class.'

Few guitar designs found big-name favour at that stage, though there is a Link Wray album cover (*Rumble! The Best Of*) that shows him holding a Supro Dual Tone, introduced around 1957 with a price tag of $149.50. Valco also dabbled in fibreglass-bodied guitars in the early '60s, but had reverted to wood-bodied models by the time they closed for business. Supro guitars have been popularised in recent years by the likes of Jack White and the Black Keys' Dan Auerbach. Jimi Hendrix's first guitar was a Supro Ozark (see elsewhere for more detail), but his apparent use of Supro amps while serving his apprenticeship on the chitlin' circuit with the Isley Bothers, Little Richard and others is harder to substantiate.

Valco made amps for Gretsch with all the Western trimmings

The amplifiers

Many up-and-coming players must have used Supro amps in their budget-conscious early days yet, with fame still far in the future, photographic evidence is hard to come by. What we do know is that Supro specialised in combos, and these often looked as good as they sounded, with vinyl to match the finish on many of their guitars.

The Supro amp range and reputation grew during the '50s, and peaked in the '60s as six-string sales boomed post the Beatles' 1963 *Ed Sullivan Show* appearance. By the late '60s the parent Valco company had become the third-largest amplifier manufacturer in the United States. Most Supros that still exist are '60s products – not only because more were produced but also, being a decade more recent, they stand a greater chance of still being around and in playable/repairable condition.

There was a model for every player and price point. The top of the line in the 1954 catalogue was the 12W to 14W 1665T Golden Holiday with its twin speakers, three inputs and an optional footswitch to engage its tremolo. List price was $130, just about double the four-and-a-half-watt, single-speaker Super 1606.

Towards the bottom of the comprehensive price list could be found the leatherette-covered 8"-speaker Model 1614 Spectator, retrospectively compared by some to the Fender Princeton, at just $75. The catalogue blurb –'reliable amplification at moderate volume' – was hardly likely to bring out the rebel in any self-respecting teenager, though the electric guitar itself was still in its infancy. 1954 was, after all, the year the Strat first made its appearance. ➔

Supro specialised in combos and these often looked as good as they sounded, with vinyl to match the finish of many of their guitars

Left, the $75 Model 1614 Spectator amp; above, catalogue pages from 1954

Photo: Gil Reynolds courtesy of www.reverb.com

Photo: Experience Hendrix

FAMOUS SUPRO USERS

Jimi Hendrix

The names of Hendrix and Supro have been linked ever since it was discovered that a Supro Ozark was the first six-stringer Jimi ever owned. Bluesman Howlin' Wolf has been pictured playing one, though it is not known if this played a part in the choice.

Hendrix experimented with various amplification systems over his short, meteoric career. Apart from a combo, believed to be a Silvertone, bought for him in late 1962 by a Nashville club owner, he mainly borrowed amps for gigs, and there is little photographic evidence of exactly what he used.

He has retrospectively been associated with the Supro Thunderbolt, issued in 1964 and initially marketed as a bass combo. It's claimed he played one while touring with acts like Little Richard and the Isley Brothers early in his career, and that claim now resides on hundreds of internet blogs. It has also been said that Hendrix used a Thunderbolt to record his first hit, *Hey Joe*, but it is inconceivable he would have transported the amp across the Atlantic.

We can surmise that, since Hendrix performed with his amp settings more or less on full, that he would have been among the first to discover and utilise Supro's warm, overdriven tones. Indeed, it's said that when he toured as opening act to the Impressions, Curtis Mayfield plugged in and found his (presumably non-Supro) speaker had been blown by the over-enthusiastic young man.

Hendrix moved on from Supro to the Fender Twin, using one from 1965 to 1966, just before his discovery by Chas Chandler and subsequent flight to Europe and fame.

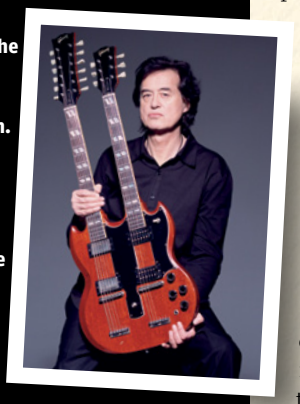
Albert Lee

The home-grown country-guitar legend, still performing today at 71, was one of the first Supro owners in the United Kingdom, and is the man who originally turned Jimmy Page on to the brand. But as with the Zepmeister, there's a certain amount of confusion and mystery involved.

His Supro ('I honestly don't know the model and probably never did,' he's confessed) was purchased from the Selmer amp shop on London's Charing Cross Road. He recalls it was equipped with a 15" Jensen, which suggests it was a Thunderbolt. If the Supro was bought in 1961, however, then the Thunderbolt can be ruled out as Supro's iconic bass amp wasn't issued until 1964.

Albert owned a Les Paul Custom, and an impressed Page bought a similar guitar and combo set-up. Lee, with regret, 'really can't remember what model amp he bought.' Albert doesn't believe Selmer sold Supros for long, and when another guitarist borrowed his and blew the speaker, he found it impossible to source a Jensen replacement so he adopted a UK-made Goodman. However, disaster struck when somebody poured beer in the amp in Germany around 1963 'and it never did sound right afterwards.' Lee abandoned it in disgust and returned to England with a Fender Bassman, his Supro days behind him.

Jimmy Page



Jimmy Page put the Supro brand back in the spotlight in a probing 1977 interview by US journalist Steve Rosen. He revealed that he used a Supro amp for all of 1968's *Led Zeppelin I*, and had returned to it a couple of years later to plug in a Telecaster and record the solo for *Stairway To Heaven*. He described that epic guitar break as 'a different sound entirely' to the first album, praising the Tele/Supro combination as 'a good, versatile set-up'.

So the names of Page and Supro were now linked. In a 1991 interview he described the amp, reputedly also used on the second Led Zeppelin album, as possessing a 12" speaker. This points towards the 15W, single-speaker 1624T Dual-Tone, but it has also been suggested that was actually a modified 1690T Coronado, made in 1962, in which Page replaced the two 10" speakers with a more easily overdriven 12" unit. A 1606 has also been suggested.

A postscript to this mystery comes with the suggestion that the Supro combo Page gave to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for inclusion in its Led Zeppelin exhibit is a Coronado acquired in 1974, long after the early Zep LPs were recorded. But then he has claimed to have owned 'as many as 50' small Valco amps back in the late '60s and early '70s, so we shall have to keep guessing...

Randy Bachman

Legendary Canadian gear collector Bachman told *Guitar & Bass* of his fondness for Supro amplifiers in 2010, when he reunited with Overdrive buddy Fred Turner to record the Bachman & Turner album on which he was looking to play 'Jimmy Page, Clapton, Jeff Beck-influenced guitar lines, basically old Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters kind of things.' He teamed old Silvertones, Harmony and Danelectro guitars with vintage amplification.

'I got some Rickenbacker amps and Supro amps, similar to the legends,' he recollected. 'You hear about Jimmy Page using his Danelectro or Telecaster into a Supro face-up on the ground with a mic hanging over it to get a great sound. I did stuff like that, and was thrilled with the guitar sound I got.'

The 10", 14W Airline combo was designed as a complement to the Airline guitar, so-called because its body resembled a map of the United States. 'Designed especially for your convenience' was the strapline for this combo, making the point that the purchaser was benefiting from 'years of engineering know-how'. At this point, Supro was still offering a Hawaiian (lap steel) guitar with a complementary amp in a 'Student Deluxe' set. As the '50s went on they offered a 1615T tremolo combo for the accordion, hedging their bets in case rock'n'roll became a fading phenomenon, while the late '50s saw combos like Comet, Spectator, Holiday and dual-speaker Rhythm King marketed under the enticing slogan 'Playing is easy when power does the work'.

By now, two of the three combos that have now become Supro standards, adopted by rock and blues players for the ease with which they can be driven from a compressed, clean tone to a warm overdrive, were moving centre stage. The 15W, single-speaker 1624T Dual-Tone combo and the more powerful twin-speaker 1690T Coronado utilised nine-pin 6973 tubes and would remain in the Supro catalogue throughout the '60s. 6973 tubes look superficially like EL84s but, in the words of one commentator, 'deliver a distinctly American voice'. The Dual Tone was upped from an original 15W to 24W, while the 35W Coronado was eventually fitted with the more powerful output stage found in the Thunderbolt model.

Introduced in 1964, the Thunderbolt was Supro's third classic. It was also their definitive bass combo... in theory. Its cathode-biased 6L6 output section delivered 35W through a 15" Supro TB15 speaker mounted in an open-backed cabinet. But the Thunderbolt did not have nearly enough power to deliver bass in a gig situation, and four-stringers who turned up the volume were doomed to disappointment; not only did the speaker and tubes distort, but the baffle board that held the massive speaker also vibrated. The

With 40W and two 12" speakers, the Big Star aimed to compete with Fender's Pro Reverb

Amp currently for sale at www.vintageguitarboutique.com

Rear view of a 1960s Thunderbolt

Klingan Guitars

1961 Supro Super Model 1606

makers' solution of adding a wooden brace across the speaker hole and another brace on the back of the baffle board improved its performance, while the rectifier tube gave way to a solid-state rectifier. But bass players were still not satisfied. As a guitar amp, however, the Thunderbolt combined the heavy bottom of the 15" Jensen with the raw tube distortion bassists shunned, and – like Fender's Bassman – it was soon adopted by guitarists looking for headroom at an affordable price. This is the combo Hendrix is said to have used early on.

Airline was the brand name used for musical instruments sold by retail giant Montgomery Ward, and Valco created a Thunderbolt clone for them. The model 62-9020A came with dark brown grill cloth and a different logo, but was the same amplifier with the same circuit as its Supro equivalent.

The Big Star, introduced in 1964, has been described as 'a poor man's Twin Reverb' – but its warm, thick tone was more in keeping with Supro's existing products than Fender's trademark clean jangle. Once memorably referred to as 'looking like a '50s kitchen appliance' with its turquoise faceplate and gold logo, the Big Star offered 40W through a pair of Jensen 12" speakers and two channels – clean and reverb/tremolo. While the reverb is limited, the tremolo is impressive.

The reverb-less Galaxy model is said to have attracted the attention of Eric Clapton, while Joe Perry has also been pictured with one. The Big Star is relatively large for a Valco, but would still not have sufficed for live work without being mic'd up. And while combos from a few years earlier command high prices, the less fashionable Big Star and Galaxy have emerged as affordable vintage options. Top West Coast session man Blues Saraceno owned three Big Stars at one time, agreeing with one internet blogger who said: 'It doesn't have a lot of gain... but it's the creamiest-sounding amp on the planet.'

The mid-'60s saw Supro wake up and smell the coffee. While the cover of the previous year's catalogue had portrayed a classical conductor promising 'the stirring sensation of concert-hall sound', the new publication showed – shock, horror! – a disembodied guitar player. More than that, the focus had switched from the combo to amps and cabs. Fender had been offering these for several years, and Supro was belatedly ↔

Left: Clapton's name helped this mid-'60s Sportsman head sell for an amazing £19,000 at Bonhams auction house

Left, the 'concert hall sound' of the 1965 range: above, a mid-'60s Statesman rig

Courtesy of www.vintageandrareguitars.com

THE NEW BREED

In the mid-2000s Fender amp designer Bruce Zinky left to start producing high-quality boutique amplifiers under his own name. He then acquired the rights to the Supro brand, and New York-based manufacturer Absara Audio shipped its first Supro reissues in May 2014.

The new range was headed by the iconic Thunderbolt plus a 'hot rod upgrade' designated S6420+ offering a choice of 35W, 45W and 60W outputs via a three-way rectifier switch. The 1624T DualTone was offered with a footswitchable tube tremolo, while the 2x10 1690T Coronado combined a 35W dual 6L6 output stage with a pair of custom-designed 10" Supro CR10 speakers. The range was completed by the all-new two-channel Thunderstorm, with a similar three-way output choice to the S6420+.

It would be difficult for the new Supro concern to market reissued budget amps at a premium price point, so the new Dual-Tone has a UK street value just south of £900. *Guitar & Bass* reviewer Richard Purvis concluded that, judged on its merits, the Dual-Tone went from 'blackface cleans to spitty garage' and was 'a light, practical combo that delivers big, raucous tones with a warm American heart.'

The Galaxy attracted the attention of Eric Clapton and Joe Perry, while at one time Blues Saraceno owned three Big Star combos

Above, a '66 Model 24; below, a current 1624T

following suit. Pushing out 70W through two 12" Jensen speakers, the top-of-the-range Statesman, featured on the catalogue cover, retailed for $450; country star Travis Tritt owns an immaculate example that has been featured in vintage amplifier books.

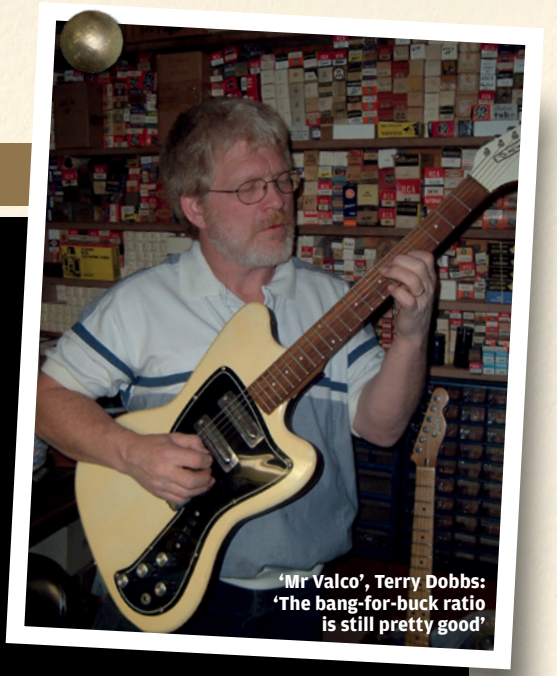
The 35W Sportsman was a similar physical size to the Statesman but a hundred bucks cheaper, reflecting its simplified layout and less powerful output. Bass players were offered the 70W, 2x12" Taurus 'designed to be seen as well as heard'. A range of combos was still available, headed by the ever-dependable Thunderbolt, but its trademark blue 'rhino hide' vinyl would shortly give way to black, Fender-esque tolex in 1967.

By now the end of the road was in sight. An ailing Valco briefly amalgamated with guitar manufacturer Kay, folding soon after in 1968. It was a sad end to a company that had never really competed with Fender; then again, it had always sold its product on price rather than style and reliability. With Marshall and others offering volume aplenty, Supros seemed more underpowered than ever.

But for every door that closes, another opens. The year Supro's parent company ceased to trade was the year a new rock band, Led Zeppelin, entered Olympic Studios in London to record their debut album. It was fitting their music had blues roots, given Valco/Supro's Chicago base... and the recent return of the Supro name to the marketplace has brought things full circle.

MR VALCO

Indiana-based amp technician Terry Dobbs is known as 'Mr Valco'. He kindly took time out to share his knowledge and advice...



'Mr Valco', Terry Dobbs: 'The bang-for-buck ratio is still pretty good'

How did Valco amps catch your interest?

I've been servicing Valcos and other amps for 25 years. What got me back into Valcos was an amp and guitar my grandfather gave me when I was 12, a small Supro amp and a Danelectro Pro guitar. When I was 17 my family moved to a new house and my Supro went missing; I never did find out what happened to it. Years later I got out the old Danelectro and thought I would just love to find an amp like the one I had, so I started looking for it. The amps weren't too hard to find and not expensive so I began collecting them. I soon realised some didn't sound right and needed servicing, so I started learning how to fix them. I developed a passion for them and still have it. I still gig on a regular basis too, and use them often – no other amps sound like them.

Why have Supro amps become collectable?

I remember when Supro amps were easy to find and inexpensive. Back then, as now, tweed and blackface Fenders cost much more than a comparable Supro. I found that the Fenders, while they do sound great, didn't sound twice as good just because they were twice the price. Supros have a voice of their own that I really like, and more players are discovering that. The Jimmy Page 'mystery' Supro amp was a factor in exposing players to these amps too. You sure don't see as many for sale as you used to; people are hanging onto them these days.

What gives them the tone they are known for?

Early Supro and Valco amps had a thick, organic Chicago blues type tone and used circuits that were typical in that era. The circuits were reconfigured starting in 1957, changing over to their own unique designs. Both periods used lower B+ voltages in their circuits than comparable Fenders. They used cathode bias on the output tubes and the tubes were biased for high current, high AB and often very close to class A. They began using ceramic disc capacitors instead of paper and foil caps they used before 1957, choosing lower values that resulted in a sharp, aggressive sound with no flub in the bass frequencies.

With very few exceptions Valco used the same style floating paraphase inverter in their push-pull amps from the earliest to the last models and that is a large part of the sound character and break-up. Pre-'66 Supro amps used just enough filter capacitance to make the amp work without hum, and this resulted in a looser, more 'forgiving' response. After '66 Valco went with heavy filtering, giving a stiffer feel and more headroom, trying to compete with other companies for the rock'n'roll market.

How do models differ in output and tone?

The characteristic Valco tone is present in about all of the models they produced from 1957 and forward. Obviously wattage, clean headroom before breakup and speaker configurations defined the different models – but, to me, they break down into three categories: higher-power amps with 6L6s or 7027s, lower-power amps using 6V6s and the amps that used 6973 output tubes. The pre-1957 amps had a different sound, very good in its own right.

What about non-Supro Valco-made amps?

Indeed, you can find the same or similar Supro circuits in brand names like Airline, Bronson, McKinney, Dwight, Atlas, Excelsior, Harmony, Gretsch, National and others. Supro-branded amps command higher prices because of the collectors' market, but players can still find good deals on these 'off-brand' Valco amps.

Are they a worthwhile buy for the money?

Most of them are. The Thunderbolt and the 1624T or Model 24 are priced pretty high these days; they're great amps and in demand right now. If you are patient and willing to search for good deals or off-brand examples, you can end up feeling really good about the value you can get. Compared to tweed and blackface Fender amps, the bang-for-your-buck tone ratio is still pretty good.

What are the best buys, and what should people look out for?

For amps with 6973s the 1600-series Supro Supreme amps are hard to beat, and you can still find them for reasonable prices. The Gretsch 6156 and the Airline 9023A are also a lot of amp in a small package. For higher power amps the Gretsch 6159 and the Supro 1688T are still not in the stratosphere price-wise and are great amps. The small, single-ended amps like the Supro 1606 and the Gretsch 6150 can be bought for under $500 and still have the Valco sound with a nice class A breakup.

Things to watch for are replaced speakers and output transformers. Sometimes the output transformer was riveted to the speaker frame; if the speaker blew, they would toss the OT with it and sub in one that didn't match well and use a funky speaker. Watch for excessive rust on the chassis and transformers, although there are more choices than ever today when it comes to original-style transformer replacements. Look out for circuitry that has been heavily modified or serviced in a less than neat and tidy manner. Above all, let your ears be your guide.

You can contact Terry via www.valcoamp.com

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Need For Speed

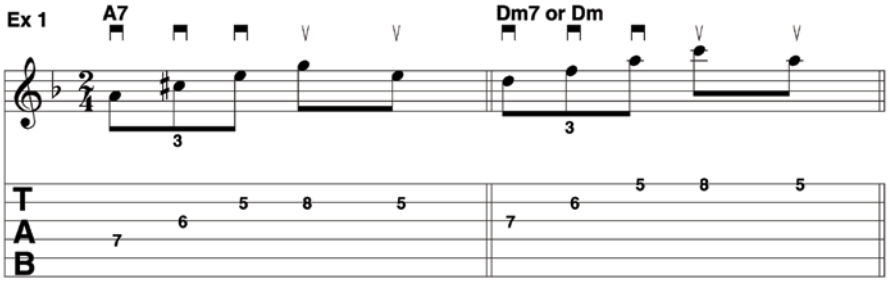
Scream if you want to go faster. Or, heck, just relax with the dots of **Douglas Noble**

Last month we dived headlong into a couple of exercises designed to promote a good sweep-picking technique, a method of playing arpeggios by using one note per string, thus achieving warp-drive soloing speeds and elevating your pickin' reputation to that of 'godlike'. Now, here are some arpeggios designed to put those techniques into practice. Though speed is the aim, you won't get a clean, accurate sound unless, as always, you practise slowly before trying to play at faster speeds. The occasional, well judged, swept arpeggio can sound extremely effective in a fill or solo.

1 SWEEPING ARPEGGIOS — 2/4 TIME

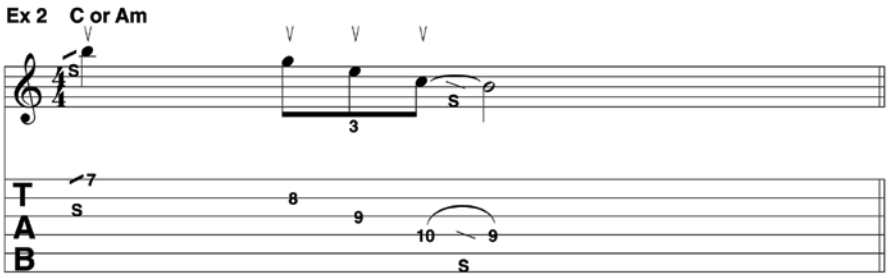
Here are a couple of arpeggios based on the same shape but suiting different chords, depending on which strings you play the shape on. On strings 4, 3 and 2 the arpeggio outlines an A7 chord (A, C#, E and G) and is therefore notated to be played over A7; on the top three strings – strings 3, 2 and 1 – the arpeggio provides a Dm7 chord (D, F, A and C) and is therefore notated to be played over either a Dm7 or Dm chord.

Use one finger per fret – first finger at the fifth fret, second finger at the sixth fret, third finger at the seventh, and fourth finger at the eighth. Practise slowly at first, around crotchet = 60, then build up speed. Make sure only one note can be heard at a time; it's best to really lift the fretting hand fingers as you go through the arpeggio. You're aiming to get the swept notes sounding like 'grace' notes leading into the high G note in the A7 arpeggio or into the high C note in the Dm7 arpeggio – in other words, they should be played as fast as possible and barely have a time value. These kind of mini sweep arpeggios are also referred to as 'rakes'.



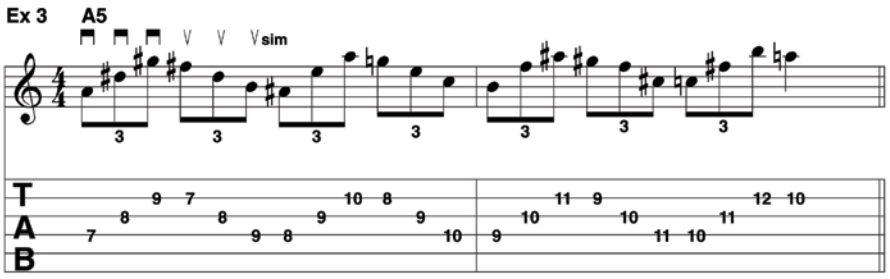
2 JAZZY ARPEGGIO — 4/4 TIME

This is a very useful jazzy-style arpeggio that can be played over either a C or an Am chord. If played over C, the arpeggio is Cmaj7 (C, E, G and B); if played over Am, it's Am9 (A, C, E, G and B, although in this case the root or A note is omitted). The first slide is to be fingered with the first finger then the rest of the arpeggio is fingered one-finger-per-fret, with the very last slide of all being played with the fourth finger. As in Ex. 1, start slowly at the speed of crotchet = 60. Be sure only one note can be heard at a time, then build up velocity.



3 OFF PISTE WITH STEVE VAI — 4/4 TIME

In sharp contrast to the previous exercises, this lick – inspired by a Steve Vai move in *The Attitude Song* – is almost atonal (in other words, it barely has a sense of key at all). It's notated to be played over an A5 chord simply because it starts and finishes on A notes. It's essentially a three-finger pattern (again, use one finger per fret, but this time with just fingers one, two and three), cleverly reversed and moved up the fretboard. It's very ear-catching – you wouldn't want to stick this into a slow, sensitive 12-bar blues. 'Sim' is short for 'simile' and means 'continue the pick directions in a similar manner'. Since this is a continuous stream of sweep picking, you'll probably find it harder to get up to speed than before. Yet again, start practising at crotchet = 60, then, as before, gradually increase the tempo.



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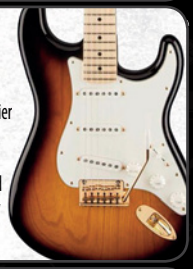

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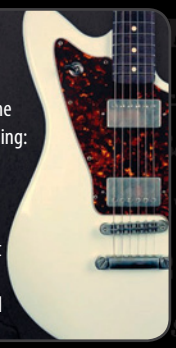

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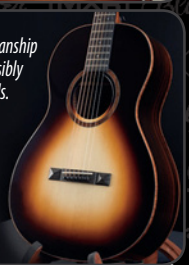

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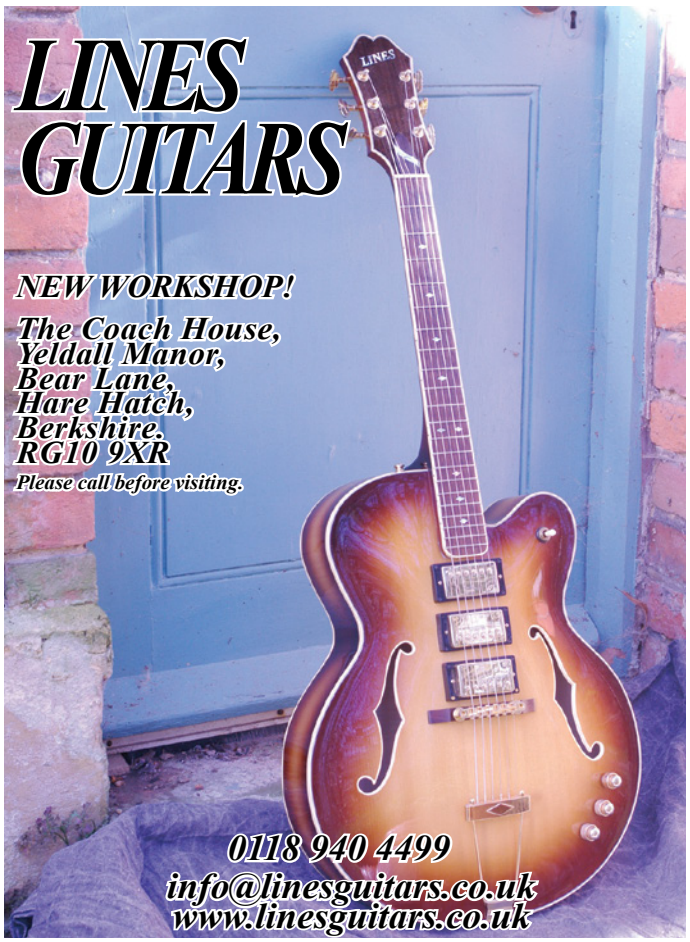

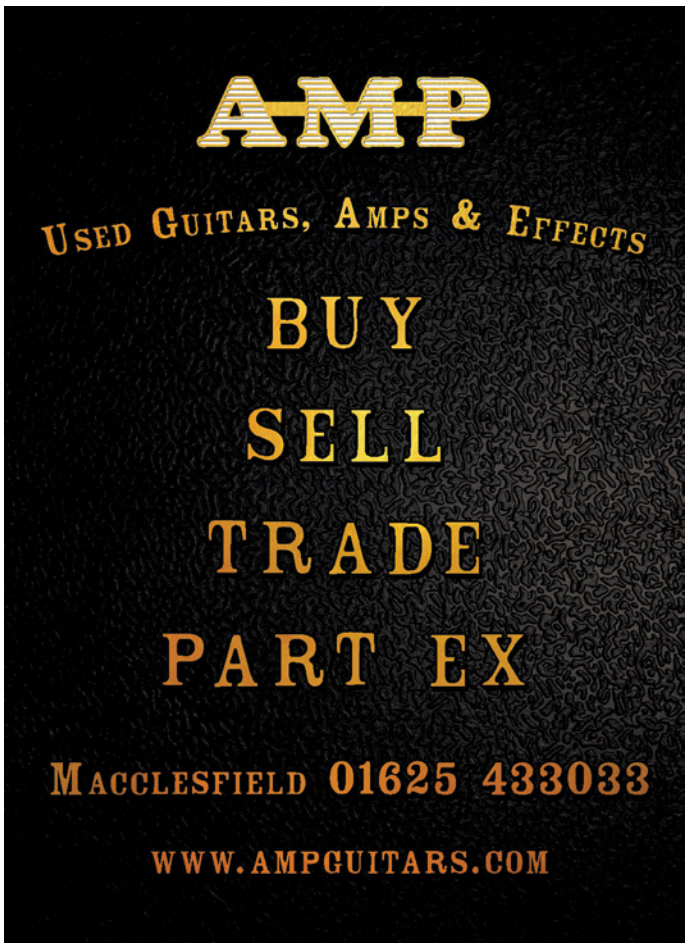

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Fender Custom Shop '69 Strat with Tele neck, '69 Abby wound and signed pickups, case, mint condition, £1600 no offers. Tel: 01617 930241, Lancs

Marshall 1987X 50W valve head in flightcase with Marshall 1960AX greenbacks 4x12" 100W cab, with cover, sounds massive, immaculate condition, £1195 ono. Tel: 01386 861873 or text 07979 793681

Cornell 10W all-valve for sale, £500 or swap for Blues Junior plus cash. Tel: CJ, 07973 187375

Line 6 Guitar Variax 300 sunburst, in excellent condition, never gigged, £275, Email: g@wescal.co.uk, West Yorkshire

PRS McCarty 2010, sunburst, moon inlays, excellent condition with case, tools and documents, £1150. Tel Mick: 01671 820954

Gibson Custom Shop Keb Mo Bluesmaster acoustic, vintage sunburst, Gibson hard case, one year old, £1250. Tel: 01255 435967, Essex

Fender Jazzmaster '65 AVRI, sunburst, unplayed, Fender brown case, £1500. Tel: 07702 216502 or email davidmumford@me.com, Hereford

Fender Mex Strat, LPB, maple neck, almost new, unmarked, fitted with bridge/neck switch for seven tones, hard case, £340. Tel: 01429 29613, Teeside

Selmer '60s Treble'n'Bass 50, plus 18" bass cab. '70s Electro-Harmonix pedals; USA Big Muff, Hot Tubes, in-built power supply. Sensible offers. Tel: 01215 013504, W Midlands

Trace Elliot 715x 7-band EQ 300W bass combo, 15" speaker, as new condition, fitted cover, £435 ovno. Tel: Chas 01622 754648, Kent

Admira Soledad classical, handbuilt in Spain, top quality, only £250. Also Ovation copy electro, vgc, only £40. Tel: Pete 01462 730981, near Stevenage

WANTED

Digitech RP-6 or RP-7. Must be good condition and price, may collect. Tel: 07923 801153

Mesa/Boogie Express 5:25, good condition, prefer London area. Tel: Mick 020 8530 1208

Epiphone Firebird VII, Vibrola gold cover, good price paid. Tel: Chris 07841 160921

Award-Session Stockton amp wanted. Tel: 07887 972019, Lanarkshire

Kay K592 Red Devil 1960s, must have Bigsby and white guard, in good to reasonable condition. Tel: Alan 0115 9255566

Squier Super-Sonic Japan, late '90s, blue sparkle preferred. Call Ron 01384 873390, Stourbridge

Gibson Les Paul R9 Plaintop 1997-2003 Historic Custom Shop, original to 'player'condition, fair price paid. Tel: 07814 797163 or email glen1149@hotmail.com, Devon

Yamaha SG200 wanted, pearl white. Tel/txt: 07710 161598 or Chris-r1968@ hotmail.co.uk

Fender soft-V neck wanted for Baja Tele, vgc or as new. Tel: 01429 296413, Teesside

Vintage Paradise guitar. Txt/call: Andy 07944 651798 or email delavigne@btinternet.com

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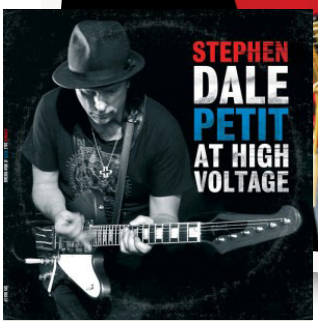
Soundtrack of my life

Stephen Dale Petit

Blues and far, far beyond is the theme for this guitarist's must-have all-time favourite records...



Busker, university lecturer, champion for new blues and true guitar aficionado – Stephen Dale Petit is a force to be reckoned with in whatever field he chooses to immerse himself. Raised in California, a Gibson SG Jr was put in his hands at seven years old. He was gigging five nights a week from his mid-teens, had a backstage guitar lesson from Albert King, played in the same band as Randy Rhoads, and even jammed with BB King. A 1990s relocation to London saw him land a support slot with Eric Clapton and hook up with the likes of Mick Taylor, David Gilmour, and Dick Taylor. His journey continues with his latest release, *At High Voltage*. It's a live album, recorded on the legendary Ronnie Lane mobile studio, originally only issued on vinyl at £30 a pop, yet all 1000 copies promptly sold out. Finally it's available on CD, and SDP's drive and passion for keeping blues vibrant and contemporary will be apparent to all from its opening bars.

John Mayall With Eric Clapton

BLUES BREAKERS

Bottled lightning. In July 1966 there was nothing close to this incendiary showcase, marrying a Les Paul to a Marshall. Finding it 25 years later was intoxicating and terrifying. Clapton may be different now, but here he was totally revolutionary. This album is a mood altering substance. Play it very loud.

Albert King

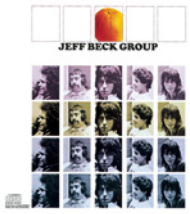
LIVE

I was visiting a friend and this was playing in the back bedroom. It was like a cartoon wisp of smoke wending down the hallway, gesturing with an audio vapour finger to follow. Unaware of my rudeness I stopped mid-sentence and ended up speechless at the speakers. I was unable to function properly for weeks.

Jeff Beck Group

JEFF BECK

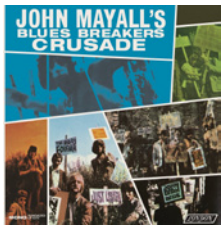
Recorded in Memphis with Stax's Steve Cropper producing, this album was a constant during my teenage years. *Highways'* solos are weapons-grade melodic snarl, the slide on *Definitely Maybe* will bring you to tears, and *I Got To Have A Song* is a demonstration of crisp, inventive guitar serving the song.



John Mayall's Blues Breakers

CRUSADE

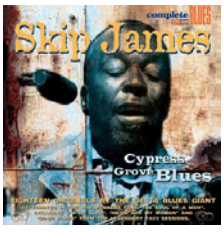
The last legendary guitar player to come through Mayall's guitarist's finishing school, 17 year-old Mick Taylor displays his fluid phrasing and gorgeous vibrato. I deciphered over-bends for the first time listening to this – a note you've bent two steps to get is so different to the same note fretted naturally.



Skip James

CYPRESS GROVE BLUES

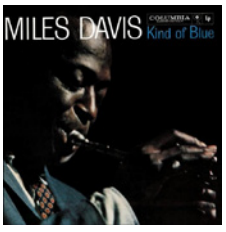
A compilation of his Paramount singles from 1931, mostly acoustic open tuning. *Devil Got My Woman* alone is worth the CD price. The counter-rhythms of his fingerpicking are staggering – it sounds like two or three guitars and he's singing on top! After accepting that I'd never be able to play like him, I still listened for inspiration.



Miles Davis

KIND OF BLUE

Yep, not a guitar in sight. It's important to listen to soloists playing other instruments – in my case horns and harmonica – to aid invention. Mick Taylor confirmed to me that he nicked a run from *So What* on his classic *Can't You Hear Me Knocking* solo; the elegant phrasing and note choices on this are glorious.



Cream

FRESH CREAM

I listened relentlessly to all the Cream albums but choose this for exhilarating innovation. Soaked in the gorgeous tone of '60s Marshall stacks, EC plays with brute force and poetic delicacy. The savage entry of his *Sweet Wine* solo, the three-note sign-off of his epic *Spoonful* solo, the over-bends of *I'm So Glad* – breathtaking.

Freddy King

LET'S HIDEAWAY AND DANCE AWAY WITH FREDDY KING

Instrumental album with all his signature songs on it – *The Stumble*, *Hideaway*, *Sidetracked*. King's legendary way with a guitar is on full display – his relentless attack, searing tone, rapid-fire melodic bursts, string rakes and impeccable turn-around phrasing. In terms of intensity coupled with finesse, there's nobody better.

The Stooges

FUN HOUSE

I never really liked Iggy Pop until I read an interview where he talked about moving to Chicago as a teenager in a quest to be a bluesman. Then I got it. The guitarist on this isn't a virtuoso player but he jumps off musical cliffs, learning to fly on the way down. A lesson in going for it and forgetting technique.

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